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STORY MAGAZINE
JAN. 1947
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FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES
THE SIX-GUN SMILE
by JOE MUSGRAVE
BRAND OF THE MUSTANG-QUEEN
She threw a slick dally on wild horses and wilder men!
AN EXCITING NOVELET by LES SAVAGE Jr.

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THE SIX-GUN SMILE . . . . . **Joe Musgrave** **96**
They took the dude with the turtle-slow draw and crowned him with a law-badge . . . sat back and waited for the shootout holiday.

Two Rangeland Novelets

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"Judge" Roy Bean, the West's most unique justice-dispenser.

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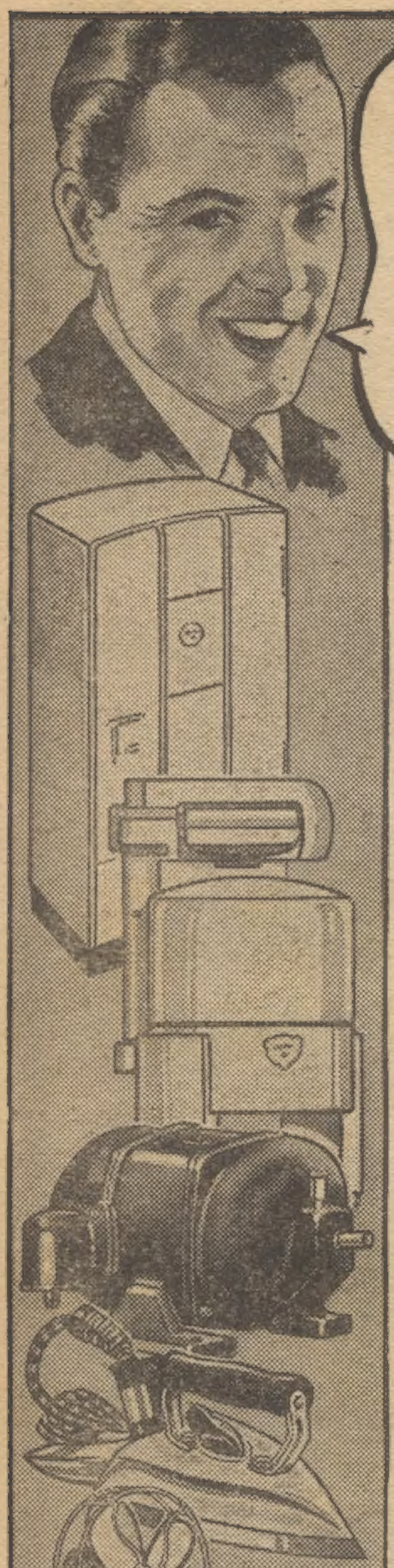

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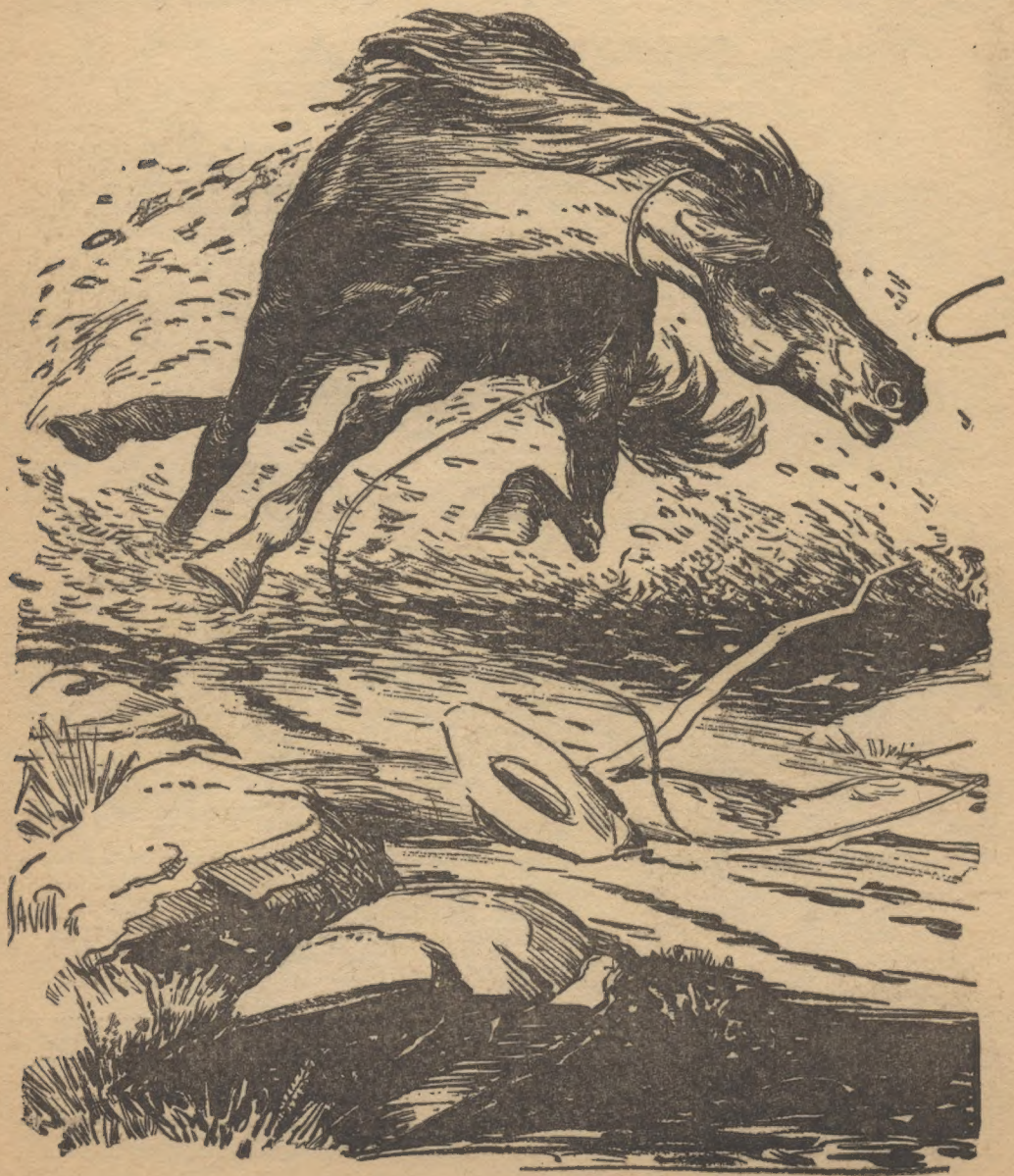
Brand Of The Mustang-Queen

By Les Savage, Jr.

There was a $5,000 dinero-pot for the wrangler who brought in Comanche, wild mustang killer . . . the cleverest horse this side of hell. But there was a lady's vow—backed by six-gun irons—that spoke death for the man who succeeded.

CADDO ADAIR found the horse trap about three in the afternoon. Caddo pulled his sorrel into the shade of the yellow autumn aspen and stepped off, a square, well-built man in his faded levis and flannel shirt. He was about



to hunker down when the pair of riders appeared at the open end of the draw. He straightened his legs out and allowed his hand to drop on the butt of his big Spiller & Burr.

Tripp Garretson walked his black purposefully on up the coulee till he was directly opposite Caddo, in the sand below, and stopped it. His seat in the saddle contained as much swagger as his walk. His long body held the same lean bitterness as his face, and his eyes looked feline, somehow, the whites of them tinged with yellow behind thick blue lids. There was a studied casualness to the way his wooden-handled Colt hung against his negligible hips.

"Hunting for Irish Nyles, Caddo?"

"Your business?" said Caddo.

Dana Border had come up with Garretson. He was a man more Caddo's age, about thirty. He wore an ancient horse-thief hat with the brim pinned up in front to keep it from flopping in his eyes. He had been almost frozen to death up in the Big Horns in his youth and it had left him with an obsession about cold. He huddled deeper into the immense, hairy buffalo coat as he spoke.

"Man named Pegoes Oporto come up

"Let go," bawled Caddo. "You can't hold him like that. He'll trample you, boy."

from Brazil to buy the Hart Farms, I hear. Something about Comanche, too. I haven't been in the Territory long, Caddo. What's the straight dope on that danged horse?"

Caddo studied them narrowly. "You know."

"Only in a vague sort of way," said Dana Border. "You hear all kinds of stories on something like that. What's the real one?"

"Comanche was Captain Keogh's horse," said Caddo. "A purebred Arabian from the Huntington stud farms in England. When Custer was wiped out by the Sioux, Comanche was the only horse out of the Seventh Cavalry left standing on Custer Hill. It was so badly wounded the Indians didn't bother running it off. When the Army found the massacre, they took Comanche back to Fort Lincoln and kept him in a sling a year till he was healed. He broke loose somehow. Next heard of he'd been sighted between the Little Horn and the Rosebud. They figure he was hunting Keogh. Since that time a lot of attempts have been made to capture him, unsuccessfully. He's become a killer, and about the cleverest beast this side of hell. Two horse-runners have already been trampled to death trying to snare him. He's turned into sort of a legend."

"A valuable legend, I'd say," said Garretson. "I hear he's servicing Tommy Hart's Arabians."

"Hart tried for a long time to capture Comanche," said Caddo. "He knew what a valuable animal any colt out of that horse would be. When he couldn't get Comanche, he did the next best thing. Every year in season he turns a selected group of mares into a box end of Little Horn Canyon. Comanche's come to know they'll be there. It's as regular and sure as if Hart had Comanche standing at stud in his own barns."

Tripp took out the makings and began deliberately rolling himself a smoke. "This Oporto. I understand he won't close the deal to buy Hart Farms till Comanche is caught and brought in. Offered five thousand to the man who could do it. I should think you'd try for that kind of money, Caddo."

There was a certain bitter resignation in Caddo Adair's voice. "Think I haven't?"

TRIPP drew his lips in against his teeth and thrust the tip of his tongue between them to lick his cigarette paper. "Being foreman of the Hart Farms doesn't exactly give you much time for wild horse chasing, does it?" He took the Bull Durham tag between his teeth to pull the bag shut again, stuffing it back in his pocket. "This Irish Niles. Think maybe he could snare Comanche?"

"I never saw him myself," said Caddo. "He's a sort of a wild kid. About as hard to get hold of as Comanche. It's the consensus around Sheridan that if anybody can trap Comanche, it's him. He's about the last bet."

"I know him a mite," said Garretson, taking a deep drag on the cigarette. "He's wild all right. Ran away from home. Lived with the Indians. Like an animal. You can hardly get near him. I don't think you want to get near him, Caddo. I don't think you want to find him."

A furrow had been growing beneath Caddo's eyes. "What are you driving at, Tripp?"

Tripp stared enigmatically at Caddo through the twin streamers of smoke he emitted from pinched, fluttering nostrils. "You always were the best horse handler in Wyoming Territory, Caddo. Let's hope you keep on being the best, for a long time to come."

Caddo's words came out on an angry, gusty breath. "You always like to sit back and smell the stew before you tasted it, didn't you?"

"All right." Tripp took another drag. "I'll come to the point. You will keep on being the best horse-handler in the Territories if you see to it that you don't find Irish Nyles."

"What's Irish Nyles got to do with it?"

"That ain't important. Why don't you get on your sorrel and trail back to the Hart Farms and forget you ever found this horse trap?"

Caddo's eyes were squinted almost shut now. "Somebody doesn't want Comanche caught?" Tripp took another pull on the smoke without answering. Dana Border's buckskin shifted nervously. Caddo bent forward slightly. "I might have known it wasn't anything honest brought you here. Who you working for, Tripp?"

"You know I was always the personifica-

tion of independence," said Garretson. He waited a moment, studying his cigarette. Finally, with the fag, he indicated Caddo's sorrel. "If you're stepping on, we'll ride back a piece with you."

"I'm not stepping on," said Caddo.

Garretson closed his thumb and forefinger on the tip of his cigarette in a quick pinch, dropped the butt to the ground. Caddo saw the man's heel touch the black, but could not move out of the way soon enough. He found himself pinned against his own sorrel by Garretson's horse sidling into him. The yellowish color of Garretson's eyes seemed to have deepened as he bent down from the saddle to grab Caddo's shirt front in his fist, pulling Caddo up onto his toes.

"I'm not a man to make threats, Adair. I don't have to. You're just not going to find Irish Nyles, that's all, understand? You're just not going to find—"

It ended in a shout as Garretson grabbed wildly for his saddle horn, trying to keep from going off his horse. But Caddo had grabbed his boot and heaved upward hard, thrusting his shoulder against the black at the same time. Garretson went off the horse as it was thrown off-balance, forced to take a step aside. Dana Border had torn his buffalo-coat away from the gun stuck naked through the center of his belt, and had it pulled halfway clear before he stopped, staring blankly at Caddo.

"Go ahead," said Caddo, free of the horse now, and holding his own gun in his hand. "If you want to."

A DUSKY grouse was sitting on a branch up in higher timber, filling his neck pouches with air till they looked ready to burst and then pumping his head up and down to deflate them and send his hollow hoot through the draw. It was a mournful sound to Caddo Adair, hunkered there in the dusk filling the aspens. Garretson and Dana Border had left hours ago, Tripp so enraged he could not speak as he remounted his black. Caddo had waited here all afternoon now, and evening chill was beginning to enter his bones.

At first, it was not definable, over the lament of the grouse. Then the ground began to tremble and Caddo's head raised. They came running up from the lower end of the draw, half a dozen dim shaggy beasts in the gloom, lather gleaming faintly across their chests and shoulders, eyes flashing bright momentarily. As they drew nearer in their dead run, Caddo could make out the big blue roan in the lead already growing his winter coat. The animal spotted an opening by the choke-cherry and wheeled toward it. His eye caught the flutter of a handkerchief where it was tied to the brush, and it turned him back. He tried again in another direction at the next open patch, turning up the other slope, but a cardboard carton turned him back from there. In this stage of excitement, the slightest thing would do to spook these wild mustangs. Caddo was standing tensely now, unable to deny the exhilaration that was in him. Then he saw the rider behind them.

He was no more than a lean supple rail of a kid with shoulders already too big for his narrow hips, forking a bare buckskin bronc in a wild swaying Indian seat with no more than a dirty hemp warbridle on the animal's jaw for control. His matted thatch of yellow hair gleamed vagrantly in the twilight. The boy came in a crazy shouting dead run that only wild youth would inspire.

It usually took two men to drive a wild bunch into a wing trap that way, but the boy was right on their tail now, and as they saw the wings and tried to wheel out to the right, he quartered in on them from that angle in a wild wheeling turn, forcing them headlong down the narrowing funnel formed by the cedarpost wings. The blue roan went straight into the pen, running so fast he was unable to turn in time to keep from smashing into the back fence. The whole pen shuddered, and the rest of the horses jammed in on him, whinneying and kicking and pulling up so much dust Caddo couldn't see anything for a moment. When it had settled, the boy had the gate thrown across the opening of the trap, and was already back on his buckskin.

Caddo stepped from the aspens. "Irish?"

The boy wheeled his buckskin, gaping at the man, the look of a startled animal twisting his gaunt face. Then, in one frightened movement, he wheeled the buckskin and thumped moccasined heels into its scarred flanks. The animal grunted and burst into a run back down the draw.

With a curse, Caddo whirled and leaped for his sorrel, both feet off the ground before he reached the animal, his left toe going into the stirrup and his right leg lifted to slap across the saddle. The animal was already wheeling, and the motion forced a centrifugal force that threw Caddo into the saddle. He tore the reins off the horn and touched the sorrel's flanks with his rowels. The horse leaped into its gallop after that buckskin.

"Irish," shouted Caddo, "come back here, I'm not going to hurt you, I just want to talk, oh damn you, I been hunting a week for this and you're not getting away now!"

He saw his sorrel could never catch the buckskin. The ridges on either side of the draw narrowed and lowered until they swept into flats beyond. Clear Creek crossed the flats a hundred yards past the end of the ridges, too deep to ford at that point, and this would force the boy to turn either right or left. Caddo took the fifty-fifty gamble and wheeled his sorrel up onto the right slope, forcing the animal to the crest. The sorrel was heaving by the time they had reached the top, but Caddo had not seen the boy look back. He dropped down the opposite slope and was almost at the bottom when the buckskin came clattering around the end of the ridge on rough shale and broke through a cherry thicket into the open. It put Caddo in the position of breaking from timber onto the boy's flank, and for those few moments, while the buckskin was crossing in front of him, he had his chance. He already had his dally rope out with a loop built and was ready when the buckskin crossed his range. He did not let the boy see him whirling. It was a hooley-ann, coming in one sweeping throw down from his hip, his hand turning over in the last moment to send the small loop out in a horizontal plane that dropped onto the boy from just above. Nyles saw it and tried to slide out from under, but the loop caught his upthrust arm and slid down.

Caddo shoved his reins against the sorrel's neck and the animal whirled away and the rope jerked taut. The buckskin was suddenly bare, running off into the cherry bushes, and Caddo was out of the saddle before Nyles had struck the ground. The sorrel reared back stiff-legged to keep the rope taut, maneuvering from side to side to keep Nyles tight in that noose no matter how much the boy struggled. Caddo reached him and touched the rope. The sorrel gave him slack enough to throw another loop around the boy's feet, drawing it up tight. Then he stood there holding the hemp and staring down at the wild animal he had caught.

Irish Nyles must have stood six feet in the tattered Ute moccasins he wore, with a frame that indicated magnificent possibilities if he had weighed fifty pounds more. He was like a hunted lobo, with all the weight run off him till the gaunt refinement of his body held a driven, almost painful look. His dirty, torn levis were belted by a rope about a middle so spare Caddo could have spanned it with two hands. He woe a greasy buckskin vest over his bare, scarred torso, and his dirty, cockle-burred yellow hair hung down his skinny, corded neck like a horse's mane. His eyes were startling deep blue, and fielled with the bitter intensity of animal rage as he writhed from side to side, fighting the rope, his thin, bloodless lips twisted, his nostrils fluttering. Caddo gave another hard tug to the rope.

"I heard you was a wild one," he said, "but I never bargained for anything like this. Take it easy now, sonny. I got you hog-tied for fair and you might as well listen to what I say. I'm not going to barbecue you. I got a job you might be interested in."

Nyles' struggles abated, and his voice came out harsh on his heavy breathing. "Job?"

"Ever hear of Comanche?"

The boy had quit fighting completely now, and he stared sullenly up at Caddo. "I don't want the job."

"Afraid maybe you can't do it," said Caddo, wiping dust off his face with a grimace. "I heard there wasn't a wild one you couldn't catch."

"Not Comanche." The boy made an abortive struggle to get free, but Caddo jerked him up short. Nyles lay quiescent for a moment, his breathing subsiding. "That's the Crow Reservation," he said finally.

"Tommy Hart has a territorial franchise on the section," Caddo told him. "He had to get that so he could pen his

mares there for Comanche in season. We won't have any trouble with the government."

The book shook his yellow head angrily. "No."

Caddo squatted down beside him suddenly, those eyes squinting at the boy. "What's the matter, sonny? You afraid of something?"

II

MAJOR ELLIS HART had retired from the service to establish his breeding farms outside of Sheridan, but the wounds received in the Indian Wars and a predilection acquired in the Army for certain potables brought about an untimely demise which left the younger Hart in charge of the farms. The idea of the Arabian horse was too new in this raw, wild, cattle country for the farms to prosper, until the legend of Comanche began to grow. Now, with that fabulous story known over the world, the Hart Farms had grown with it, becoming the largest and most famous horse farms in the Northwest.

Caddo Adair dropped down the wagon road from Crazy Dog Hills toward the large hip-roofed barns and solid pack pole corrals. Bob Ligget was gaiting a gelding in the first pen they reached, and he halted the horse abruptly to stare at the wild figure riding beside Caddo. Caddo passed through the corrals that flanked the road and rounded the last barn to cross the open meadow toward the big white house where it set on a gentle southern slope. A woman's laugh floated out to him from behind the building, and Caddo couldn't help drawing up a little in his saddle. It always did that to him, even though he fought it.

A handler had brought a white mare and a fuzzy, long-legged, knock-kneed little colt up here for their inspection. The woman was fondling the colt as Caddo rounded the corner. She had a tall, statuesque figure and a finely-chiseled profile, black hair worn in a long bob that caught the early morning sun in glistening ripples. The heavy leather skirt of her riding habit flapped against bare legs as she turned toward them. Her first sight of Irish Nyles drew a strange sort of surprise into her face, arching piquant black brows above her big, dark eyes.

"Finally got him to come," said Caddo, dismounting stiffly. "Irish, this is Mora Banner. She runs the Red Banner outfit. Maybe you've seen some of their cattle over Clear Creek way."

"Irish Nyles." She said it softly, something vaguely predatory in the husky tone, and then she chuckled, and said it again. "Irish Nyles."

"Yes, Mora," said Caddo.

She straightened perceptibly, turning toward him as if with some effort. "Caddo," she said, "I haven't seen you in so long. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"I been a week on this boy's trail," said Caddo. "I thought we might have some grub and a little shuteye before he takes out after Comanche. We been riding all night from Clear Creek."

Tommy Hart had been obscured by the horses until now. He came around from behind the mare, a tall youth, handsome in a florid way, with rich brown hair worn in long sideburns. He had an arresting figure at first glance, with broad shoulders and long straight legs, the bottoms of his clean pressed levis stuffed into black cavalry boots. It would have taken a second look to mark the thickness of his waist, or the softness of his hands.

"I didn't think you would be able to find him, somehow," he said, speaking to Caddo, but looking up at Irish in a strange, empty way. "Pegoes Oporto will be glad."

"The Brazilian around?" said Caddo.

"He's in Sheridan," said Mora. "Get down, Irish, we'll go in the kitchen for some food."

"Maybe he'd better eat with his hands," offered Hart.

"Don't be a fool, Tommy," laughed Mora, tossing her gleaming head. "Come on, Irish. What's the matter?"

The boy sat his buckskin without moving. His eyes were on Caddo. Mora looked from Irish to Caddo, and for a moment, a nebulous, wondering expression crossed her face. When she spoke again, it was softer.

"Caddo will come too, Irish."

They had pot roast and pan bread and black coffee left over from breakfast and then went down to the bunkshacks. Caddo had a hard time getting Irish to enter the

building and bed down in one of the bunks, but the boy was too weary for much argument. Caddo left him undressing and stepped outside to put his sweaty saddle in the sun to dry. Then, somehow, Mora was there.

"I thought you stayed at the house," he said.

"A strange, wild creature," she murmured, "isn't he?"

"Orphaned," said Caddo. "Lived with the Indians a while. There are horses like that. You can never tame them."

"I never saw one *you* couldn't tame," she said. "Even this one. He wouldn't move without you."

"Interest you?"

"Why not?" she said defiantly.

"You're sort of wild yourself," he told her. "I always thought it would take more of a man than Tommy Hart to tame you."

"You, Caddo?" she said, in a soft, tantalizing tone.

He started to answer. Then he saw the mocking look in her eyes, and closed his lips over the words. He drew in a heavy breath.

"I guess I got no right, have I? I guess you're a little rich for my blood," he said finally.

Tommy Hart came around the corner of the bunkshack and stopped when he saw them. "I'd like to talk with Caddo a minute, Mora."

She shrugged, turning to walk back toward the house. Hart came over to Caddo; jowls were already making their faint formation on either side of his jaw, and the tautness of facial muscle beneath these was barely visible. He cleared his throat.

"I suppose you're taking right off after you get some sleep?"

"Might as well," said Caddo. "The farms were pretty near on our way into the Crow country. We needed a pack horse and some extra duffle anyway. Ever hear of Tripp Garretson?"

Hart drew in a short breath, clearing his throat again that way. "Name's familiar. Doesn't he ride in the shade?"

"Nobody ever pinned anything on him. He tried to stop me from finding Irish Nyles." Caddo was watching Hart's face when he said this, and he saw something pass through the man's eyes. "What's up, Hart?"

Hart seemed to hesitate. Then he put his hand on Caddo's arm. "I don't know, Caddo. But I—" he hesitated, searching Caddo's face— "I don't think you'd better go out. There's something . . ."

Again it was that hesitation, and he dropped his hand from Caddo's arm, motioning with it as if trying to find words. Caddo pursed his lips.

"I was wondering," he said, "to whose interest it would be *not* to have Comanche found."

THE snow-capped peaks shone under a hot afternoon sun that drew perspiration from Caddo as he halted in the shallows of the Little Horn River behind Irish Nyles' buckskin. He motioned toward the low hills on their right, covered with white-domed columns of rank bear grass.

"Yonder's Custer Hill, according to the Indians. When Hart sends us up here with mares, we turn them out at this spot and leave. If we stay within five-ten miles of the place, Comanche won't show up at all."

"That's why we traveled in water the last day," said Irish. "There won't be no scent of us."

"You plan to lure him in with that mare?" said Caddo. "Picket her anywhere and Comanche'll scent man on the rope before he comes within sight of it. I tell you he's uncanny."

"No picketing," the boy told him. "You can see how the Little Horn canyon narrows near the south end between the Wolf Mountains and the Big Horn foothills. There's only shore on one side of the water, and there ain't no tracks in that sand. That means he enters the canyon from the north if he waters here at all. The wind blows through the canyon from that direction, and if we do our work down here, he won't be able to scent us. We'll stay in the water all the time so as not to leave any smell on the ground."

They chose a tall cottonwood with roots undermined and weakened by the constant flow of water, and standing their animals in the shallows, it took both of them to pull it over once they had roped it. This blocked the narrow section of waterway. They chopped down several aspens farther south on the shore and dragged them up

to lay across the shore with the foliage still on. Then they rode several miles back downstream to picket their saddle horses in a hidden gully. With nothing but their guns and dally ropes and a saddlebag full of grub, they mounted the mare bareback and rode double back to the canyon. They turned her loose just north of the felled trees. Then they walked through the shallows another two miles to the northern end of the canyon, chosing a place where the water reached the very bottom of the cliff, and climbing this escarpment fifteen or twenty feet to a wide ledge. Irish gathered a handful of larger stones and piled them near at hand, and Caddo drew forth some jerked beef and stale pan bread for their evening meal. Then they settled down to wait.

"You don't think this is the way," said Irish, munching on the pan bread.

Caddo saw how narrowly the boy was watching him, and shrugged. "We tried doing it with pens before."

"Not this kind of pen, I bet. And you had your saddle horses along to cause a big commotion before you even saw Comanche."

"I'll admit we never tried it quite this way," said Caddo. "But how will we nab him on foot? He's as quick as greased—"

The sound across the river stopped him, and both of them raised up slightly, straining to see through the gloom. Then, with the remainder of the pan bread in one hand, Nyles scooped up one of the rocks and heaved it outward. It clattered against the cliff on the opposite side, and Caddo heard the snorting sound above the gush of the water, and could make out the mare now, rearing in a startled way and turning back downstream. He felt a growing admiration for this youngster's remarkable talents.

Several more times that night the mare tried to get out of the canyon, and each time they threw rocks across to spook her and turn her back. Caddo dozed in his blankets during the small hours of the morning. It was near dawn when a nudge in his ribs woke him. He did not move. Irish was lying utterly silent on his belly beside Caddo, peering in a tense, expectant way at the river. Then it came. A dim, feral snort. A stretch of thick silence. Another snort. Finally, an answering whinney.

CADDO was lying on his back, unable to see across the water, and all he could do was watch Nyles' face. It told him as much as he needed. The boy had been running his tongue between his lips. Abruptly he stopped, and his mouth opened slightly and his head raised a little more. The expectance in his face changed to a satisfaction. Without looking at Caddo, he moved out and began to climb down the cliff. Caddo rolled from his blankets and followed, holding his coiled rope and gun above his head with one hand as he plunged into the icy water. It was a short swim, but the heavy current swept them far downstream before they reached footing on the other side. Trying to keep from breathing too audibly with the cold water and the violent effort, Caddo crawled out onto the sand. Irish Nyles was already moving down the shore. They had trotted about half a mile when they heard sounds from ashead. Nyles broke into a sprint, shaking out his rope, and Caddo followed suit, catching sight of the dim shapes moving down there.

One of the horses whinneyed, and made a tentative dash toward them. Caddo had a vague impression of a wild, tousled mane, and flashing eyes, and then the animal reared up and wheeled the other way, heading downstream at a dead run. The second animal followed without as much enthusiasm. Both horses disappeared around the turn, and the men ran after them. It was heavy going in the deep sand with high-heeled boots, and Caddo was already winded. The boy ran like a deer, his moccasins hardly touching the sand, a smooth wild grace to his movements. He was far ahead of Caddo, and disappeared around that turn after the animals. Caddo was almost to the curve himself when he heard Irish shouting.

"He's come up against those trees now and he's turning back. Get ready with your rope, Caddo. If I can't snare him it's up to you. Here he comes. Get ready with your rope, Caddo—"

It was still too dark for Caddo to make anything out clearly as he rounded the turn. He had sense of the wild beast charging straight down that narrow strip of white sand toward them, and of Irish's wild yell, and the twisting motion of the boy's gaunt body as he made his throw.

There was a momentary interval of flying sand and unreal movement, and then the horse's hollow, grunting sound as it hit the end of that rope. The sand shook beneath Caddo as the animal went down.

"Get in there with your tie-downs," yelled Irish. "He's crazy and I can't hold him a minute. Get in there, Caddo ' . ."

Caddo was already dashing for the downed animal, but before he could throw a loop on its flailing legs, the horse had managed to wrench enough slack in the rope to scramble erect before Irish could pull it taut again. The loop was around Comanche's neck, and instead of pulling back or trying to jerk away as most horses would do, the animal wheeled toward Irish Nyles and broke into a run with its head down like a wild steer. Caddo was on the left side and all he had left was a forefoot. He made his throw in a desperate attempt to get the loop across Comanche's shoulder and catch his feet, but the animal was traveling too fast, and with a sinking feeling, he felt the whole of his rope fall slack in his hand.

Irish waited till the last moment, then leaped aside, still hanging grimly to the rope. If Comanche had gone on past, the rope would have drawn taut again and thrown him. But the wily animal stiffened both forefeet and came to a halt that shuddered the earth, wheeling to charge back at the boy.

"Let go the clothesline," bawled Caddo, running toward Irish. His own rope was stretched out uselessly on the ground. "You can't hold him like that. He'll trample you, boy!"

"I got him," shouted Irish hoarsely, barely dodging the animal's next charge. "I ain't letting go. Get your rope again. I'll give you time. Hurry up, Caddo . . ."

Comanche wheeled once more, so that his rump was toward Caddo, and Caddo had watched maybe a thousand horses rear up before this, and knew exactly how the muscles tautened and rippled across their rump as they shifted their weight. Irish was down on one knee, still thrown off-balance from that last violent dodge. Caddo saw he could never snake in his own rope in time for the throw. There was only one thing left.

Dropping the end of his dally, Caddo threw himself at Comanche. The horse was halfway in the air, with Irish crouched helplessly beneath its lethal forefeet, when Caddo's body struck its left shoulder. It knocked Comanche to one side. His front hooves struck the sand less than a foot from Irish. With a wild whinney, Comanche whirled his rump inward, trying to roll over on them both. Caddo could not get out from beneath in time, and all he could do was catch that matted, tousled mane and throw himself atop the animal, meaning to dive on over the other side as Comanche rolled. But the horse's weight shifted as he felt the man atop him, and instead of going on into the roll, he caught himself, staggering a little, and then he was standing utterly still beneath Caddo.

IRISH had thrown himself aside to escape the roll, and he stood there, staring at Caddo. For that moment, neither of them dared speak. Caddo sat Comanche tensely, hand twined in the mane, waiting for the first violent buck. But the horse did not move. It stood there in the sand, trembling from the violent action, hide wet and glistening, nostrils fluttering. Finally, Caddo started speaking, in a low, soothing tone.

"That's a boy. Just take it easy, boy. I think we got him, Irish. That's it, that's it. He must still remember being ridden. Quiet now, Comanche, quiet now, boy. See if you can get close enough to throw a war bridle on him with that rope. Easy now, Comanche—"

It was the shot that cut him off. With the sound echoing back and forth between the cliffs, Comanche jerked beneath Caddo in a startled way, and then wheeled wildly, whinneying in fright, and broke past Irish in a gallop. Caddo would have been thrown off the rump but for his grip on the mane, and he threw his weight forward, knees pinched in against the heavily muscled shoulders. There was another shot, and sand made its pale spurt a few feet ahead of the horse. The old war horse dodged as if it had been a cannon ball falling there, and slammed up against the cliffs. It tore Caddo's leg back and he roared with the pain, unable to keep his seat as the earth swept him on off the horse. He lay there in the sand, stunned, dimly conscious of Comanche charging on up the canyon toward the open end,

and then of Irish Nyles running to him and dropping to one knee.

"You all right, Caddo, you all right?"

Caddo groaned, rolling onto his belly, then rising to hands and knees and shaking his head. "I guess so. Just knocked me off."

"We had him, too," said the boy, tears shining in his eyes. "We had him."

Caddo was looking at the cliffs across the river. "You got your gun?"

Irish's head turned toward him in a quick, comprehensive motion. "I dropped it back there fighting Comanche."

"Get it then," Caddo told him, still looking up there. "You might need it."

III

AN EARLY morning haze dimmed the pattern of corrals about the Hart house, and Caddo Adair had come out of the bunkshack with the last of his breakfast bacon in his hand, when he caught sight of Mora Banner coming in on the Sheridan road. Caddo had personally trained the colt Tommy Hart had given her three years ago, and he took as much pleasure in its high, collected action, coming toward him, as he did in the smooth way she handled the animal. It would be nice, he started to think, and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth in a bitter gesture.

"Heard you were back," said Mora, drawing the five-year-old to an easy halt before him. "Had some trouble up north?"

"We had Comanche," Caddo told her. "Somebody spoiled it for us."

She dismounted, turning toward him. "You actually had the horse?"

"I was on his back," said Caddo. "He was fighting like a Sioux up till then. Memory, or something. I don't know exactly. Anyway he quit cold the minute I hit his hide. We could have brought him in like a lamb if somebody hadn't started pot-shotting. The gun sounds sent him wild again. I guess that's memory too. Spilled me off. We tried to find who'd been shooting, but they'd already shucked their kack."

"When you going out again?"

He felt uncomfortable, somehow, under her gaze. "We tried to track Comanche. That wasn't no good. Lost him through the snow in those Big Horns. Ran out of grub and gaunted our own animals. I figure we skeered Comanche up so he won't show for a long time now. We just have to sit around till word comes down he's been sighted again. It's going to be a long process."

He sensed that Mora's attention had not been on him for the last part of his speech, and he turned in the direction her glance had taken. Irish was leading a bay from the barns. Though not yet mature, it already displayed the slightly dished-face and long level croup so typical of its breed.

"Take it easy on that horse, Irish," Caddo told him. "You're not handling a bronc now."

The boy took a swift breath to say something, then held back the words, shrugging sullenly. Over one arm he had the bitting rig, composed of a padded back band and a crupper attached. Caddo laid the back band over the horse's back and ran the animal's tail through the crupper.

"You got to be careful no loose hairs are in between the tail and crupper," he told Irish, buckling the surcingle in place. "Their tail's more sensitive than you know. Hurt him once in these early stages and you'll spend a week regaining his confidence. Now put the bridle on him and take him in the corral for fifteen minutes. I want to see you gentler than you were yesterday."

"I don't see why we have to drive him in that sulky," Irish complained, slipping the snaffle bit into the bay's mouth. "We aren't working him for trotting, are we?"

"I told you this ain't one of your broncs," said Caddo. "It increases a horse's commercial value if it's trained for driving as well as riding. Makes it all round gentler and safer."

"It gives him a high, stylish, and fast trot that is desirable in all pleasure saddle horses, too," said Mora.

The mockery in her voice made them both glance at her. Watching her with a puzzled frown, Irish fastened the side-straps to their rings on the back band and the bit. Then he climbed in the sulky and clucked his tongue. With the horse walking toward the corrals, Caddo spoke to Mora.

"What's your idea?"

"On the contrary," she said. "What's *your* idea? You sounded like a schoolteacher. I never heard you take the trouble to tell anybody that much about it."

Caddo shrugged, uncomfortable again. "He's just got a talent for horses, that's all. You should have seen the way he handled Comanche. He might as well be put to work while we're waiting around here."

"With you as teacher," she smiled. "You sort of like that boy, don't you?"

He turned partly away. "All right. Why not? Isn't often you find anybody with the feel for horses he's got. Time I passed on a few of my tricks anyway. What's the word?"

"Protege," she smiled. "Do I make you nervous?"

HE started to turn back, but Bob Ligget came down the corral fence. He was as tall as Caddo, but his great breadth made him appear shorter until they stood together. His legs were set far apart beneath wide hips, and it gave him a quick, square, catty stride that swung his whole body from side to side with each step, only lending, somehow, to his whole impression of potent force.

"Will you help Irish?" Caddo asked him.

"No," said Ligget.

The flat, emotionless tone of it drew Caddo up sharply. He stood there a moment, staring at Ligget. "What's the matter, Bob?" he asked, finally.

Ligget wiped a grimy hand across his thick, flat lips, his small, bright, brown eyes meeting Caddo's defiantly. "You coddle your own dogies, Caddo. That kid don't know any more about working a good horse than an Indian. He still thinks he's breaking broncs."

"You had to learn when you first came here," said Caddo. "You'd been working horses all your life, and you had to learn all over again."

"It isn't the same."

Caddo was aware of how Mora's eyes had narrowed, watching them, and he felt something tight enter his voice. "I guess it isn't," he said. "Why don't you want Irish to stay here, Bob?"

"It isn't that—"

"There was a man named Tripp Garretson who didn't want me to find Irish in the first place," said Caddo.

Ligget's heavy black brows lowered till his bright eyes were almost hidden. "Don't try to connect me with that."

"You're doing a pretty good job yourself, Bob."

"I—"

"You going to help the kid?"

Ligget had started to move the same moment he started to speak, and Caddo's voice cut it all off. Ligget was poised there, with all the weight forward on his toes, his breathing stirring his chest more perceptibly. The word came out on that breath, as toneless as before.

"No."

Caddo's chin lowered till there were two deep furrows in the leathery, unshaven flesh beneath his jaw. "Then I'll stop asking you, Bob. It's an order now." Ligget's breathing was audible, now. His eyes were locked with Caddo's and his weight had not settled back yet. "I guess you know I'm not one to take little differences like this to the boss," said Caddo, finally. "Don't make me put my hands on you, Bob Liggett."

He could see a faint slack appear in the waistband of Ligget's dirty jeans as the muscles tensed across the man's stomach, drawing it in. For a moment he thought Ligget was going on from there, and a dull excitation leaped through his own body. Then Ligget settled back on his heels, expelling his air through the nostrils with a harsh, rasping sound.

When he turned and gone toward the corral, out of earshot, Mora allowed a faint, enigmatic smile to spread her lips. "I'm glad I saw that," she said, looking strangely at Caddo. "I'm really glad I saw that, Caddo."

THERE was a twenty-foot rope with a snap fastening it to the ring beneath the snaffle bit, and Ligget held the other end of this while Irish drove the horse in a circle about him. Mora had left to see Tommy Hart at the big house, and Caddo watched from the corral fence for a few minutes.

"Ease up on those reins, Irish," he shouted. "Now turn him around and trot him the other way. That's it. Easy. Always easy. You got ten minutes left. Put him

back in the barn after that. You'll find me in the loft."

They had gotten in a fresh load of grain in from Sheridan for the winter, and Caddo went to the big hiproofed barn to check the men storing it in the bins. It was a sweaty, grimy job, with dust from the feed filling the loft in choking clouds, and Caddo had lost the measure of time when the commotion started from below. Perhaps it was the small shudder in the wall of the barn which first drew his attention. Then someone's shout. A horse started whinneying wildly, and the barn shook again to a volley of kicks. The run-down heels of Caddo's boots made a dull thud across the thick carpet of grain spilled on the loft floor as he ran toward the ladder. He climbed about halfway down and then dropped off, landing on bent knees in the aisle between the stalls. Down at the far end the violence was growing. A man ran toward him going that way, and over the screams of frightened horses and the clatter of kicking hooves, Caddo could hear him shout.

"The kid, the kid, he's in the stall with that punchy colt, he'll get his brains kicked out—"

Something caught at Caddo's vitals, like a big hand, twisting them in a knot, and though he had to rise and break into his own run while the other man passed him, he was the first one to reach the other end of the barn. Just before he got to the last stall, the bay Irish had been working backed out of the stall, squealing and kicking, and wheeled suddenly out the door of the barn.

Other hands were coming from that direction, however, and one of them stopped the horse.

Through the woor, Caddo could see Irish dodging about in the narrow box stall, trying to escape the convulsive viciousness of a big grey colt, his face streaming blood. The grey tried to crash through the door, but in its frenzy, caught the opening broadside, and only succeeded in shaking the upright supports. Its failure to escape that way only added to the animal's rage, and the colt whirled back, rump striking the edge of the loose, swinging door, and knocking it shut with a bang.

"Get out, Irish," roared Caddo, pushing the door open again. "Climb over the wall. He'll kill you. He's punchy in that stall."

He saw Irish leap for the wall, but the boy was weak from fighting, and as he tried to claw his way over, the colt came up against him broadside in its frantic struggles. The boy screamed in a sick, broken way, slipping down. Face contorted, Caddo swept a lead rope off its hook on a post and jumped inside. Irish was crumpled beneath the wild, flailing hooves of the colt, and Caddo threw himself against the hot, sweaty hide of the animal. It knocked the colt off-balance and he staggered across the narrow space, using his feet to keep from falling rather than for kicking. Caddo followed the animal on across, heaving his body up against its side to keep it going, slinging the lead rope beneath the animal.

"Get him out now," he shouted hoarsely at the other men, fighting with the animal to pull that rope about its forelegs and throw it, "get the boy out now, damn you, get him out—"

WITH his shoulder and head shoved into the hot, fetid, shifting flank of the colt, he was dimly aware of Ligget and another man finally jumping in to drag Irish from the stall. With the boy out, Caddo tried to jump back. With the man's weight releasing it suddenly, the colt lashed out wildly. One of the hind hooves caught Caddo in the belly, knocking him against the side wall. Wheezing in pain, he fought to his feet, still clutching the lead rope. He knew what Irish must have felt, now, as a shift of the colt's awkward body blocked him from the door. The animal was frothing at the mouth in wild excitement, the whites flashing as its eyes rolled in its head. The barn shuddered with its violent movement against the stall supports, and outside a hubbub of shouting, shifting men filled the aisle. Coughing in the sawdust, Caddo jumped at the horse, trying to anticipate its next kick.

He saw the shift of its weight and twisted around to be carried in close. His body caught the hind leg before it could lash out, aborting the kick, and then, with his weight in against the horse, pinning it momentarily against the wall, he bent to sling that lead rope at its front feet once more. He missed the first time, and the colt

whinneyed shrilly, trying to back away. Keeping his shoulder against its rump, Caddo took another throw. This time the lead rope went around, and he caught the other end as it swung back. He stepped back to let the colt shift away from the wall and give it room to fall in. The animal tried to wheel its rump toward him and lash out with the hind hooves. He gave a yank with both hands on that lead rope. It pulled the colt's forelegs from beneath it.

The animal was not yet fully grown, but it was a big colt, weighing close to seven hundred, and it shook the ground, falling. Caddo sprawled across its forelegs, throwing a couple of half-hitches in the rope.

"Get in here with your tie-downs," he yelled, and in a moment, a hand appeared in the doorway with another short length of rope. He jumped past Caddo, going down to catch the heaving rump with one knee and forcing it into the ground so he could throw a loop on the flailing hind legs. Caddo rose, then, wiping sweat and dust off his face.

"Leave him lie like that," he panted, "till he quiets down," and holding his stomach, he stumbled out the stall door. Irish was sitting up with his back against a support across the aisle, the hands milling about him. Caddo lowered himself before the boy. "You all right?"

"I guess so," muttered Irish.

"I told you to stay clear of that colt in the stalls," said Caddo, anger sweeping him now that he saw the boy was not hurt badly. "He's punchy in close quarters. He's already put one of our hands in the hospital. How in hell did you get in with him?"

"I didn't know he was there," said Irish. "Mora told me to put the filly away in that stall."

It took a moment for that to strike Caddo, and then his words came out in a hollow, unbelieving way. "Mora . . . told you?"

IV

THE RED BANNER spread its corrals and outbuildings across a long meadow of lush grass as blue as Kentucky graze. Mora Banner's father had come from England with the influx of English capital into the Wyoming cattle market, and he had designed his house along the lines of his native rural architecture, with low roof lines and half-timbering of dressed pine. The scrape of a fiddle emanated from the opened windows as Caddo halted his horse atop the last rise before the road dropped down into the compound.

"When Mora gives a party, every blade in the country comes," he said sourly. "You won't even get a chance to see her, boy. She'll be so dizzy from dancing she'll think you're a fence post. I don't see why you wanted to come at all."

"You wanted to come yourself," said Irish, grinning, "and don't try to deny it, Caddo. I seen the way you watch her."

Caddo turned soberly to him, studying the wild refinement of the boy's face a moment. They had prevailed upon him to wash his hair and it formed a shining golden mane now, paler streaks of ash blonde burned through the top by the sun. A week of good steady meals had filled him out a bit, and he looked more mature in the clean levis and white shirt they had given him.

"You know she's out of our class, don't you?"

"Why?" said the boy, gazing at him.

"I—" Caddo hesitated, unable to put into words what years of environment had instilled in him.

"You take too much for granted, Caddo," said Irish, that vagrant grin making its flash in his sun-darkened face. "Just because you're a foreman and Tommy Hart's your boss? What's wrong with being a foreman? You're the best in the Territory they tell me. That's something to be proud of. Is Hart as good at his job? If I wanted a woman like that, I'd take her."

"You're a kid—"

"I'm old enough. And so are you. Age doesn't matter as much as that. You letting it stand in your way? Ten years' difference in your ages, maybe. You're still twice the man any of those fancies are she goes around with."

Caddo settled a little deeper in his saddle, nudging his sorrel on down the road, the thoughts stirring in him somberly. He might have reacted to that a few days ago. He might have begun to wonder if the kid were right, if there were a chance. But

now, somehow, it failed to arouse him. He kept remembering who had told Irish to put the filly in that stall. He couldn't figure it out. Or maybe he didn't want to . . .

They hitched their horses among the others at the racks before the house and crossed the stone porch, halting a moment in the open door. The Banner living room ran almost the whole length of the house, furnished in Sheraton—which James Banner had imported from England. At one end, by the fireplace of smooth round boulders from Clear Creek, was the fiddler and a pianist Mora had hired from town. The rest of the room was overflowing with men and women from the surrounding spreads. Caddo could see how many of Hart's type there were, gay, laughing young men in impeccable fustians or steel pens. Hart himself was standing by a large sideboard which held cut glass decanters of liquor, and his fleshy face was already flushed deeply. He turned part way around to see who was in the doorway, and a surprised look passed through his glazed eyes, and then something else.

"It's all right, Tommy, I invited them."

MORA'S voice reached Caddo over the hubbub of talk and the waltz being played, and then she was sweeping through the crowd, three or four of the younger men following her. She had on a green silk overdress, caught up at the sides by rosettes, and her hair was arranged in braids and pinned close to her head with one long ringlet coming from the braids on the left side and hanging down over her left shoulder. It changed her face, somehow, for Caddo, who was used to seeing her hair hanging long and free, and he didn't know that he liked it this way. She took each of them by the hand, speaking to Caddo, but smiling at Irish.

"I didn't think you could really get him to come, Caddo."

"I couldn't hold him back," said Caddo, a faint frown drawing its furrow in his brow as he felt their eyes on him. Or was it on him? He saw the vague smile on Hart's face. The man was looking at Irish. They were all looking at Irish.

"Shall we dance?" There was something behind Mora's smile. "Do you dance, Irish?"

"I used to swing the squaws up on the Rosebud," grinned the boy.

"Did you," said Mora, and threw her head back to laugh, and the rest of them joined in. "Let's dance, then, Irish."

"Wait a minute." Caddo's voice came from him more loudly than he had anticipated, and Mora turned toward him sharply, something inquiring raising her brows.

"Jealous already, Caddo? You'll get your chance."

"It isn't that," said Caddo. "I don't dance. I think maybe we better—"

"Come over and have a drink, Caddo." It was Tommy Hart's hand on his arm, pulling him insistently toward the sideboard. He tried to jerk away, but Mora had already swung Irish off through the crowd, and the fiddler broke into a faster waltz. Caddo felt the heat of a sullen anger rising in him, and he moved stiffly to the sideboard with Hart's hand on his arm, watching the crowd narrowly. A few of them were dancing, but they had left an open space around Irish and Mora, and Caddo could see how they were watching the two. Caddo felt his breath coming out more heavily, and he tried to pull away from Hart again.

"Whatsamatter, Caddo . . ."

But he had already stopped. It was the boy's wild grace again. It was astonishing, how swiftly he comprehended the form of the dance. He was swinging Mora around smoothly, that vagrant grin coming and going in his sunburned face. Caddo felt Hart's hand slide off, and turned to see a faintly puzzled disappointment in the man's face, and almost laughed out loud. It was the same in Mora's face. That veiled, waiting speculation had been in her eyes, and her smile, looking up at the tall youth, but now it was something else. A perceptible flush tinted her cheek as Irish swung her around and her eyes were sparkling.

Hart must have interpreted it the same way Caddo did. He made an abrupt, clumsy movement beside Caddo, and shoved his way through the crowd, knocking into the dancers. He tried to cut in, but Mora only threw her head back, and her laughter pealed out above the music as Irish swung her away from Hart. Diffused blood swept into Hart's face, darkening it, and his

sensuous lips moved in words Caddo could not hear. He seemed about to go after them again when the music stopped abruptly. It was not the end of the song, and Caddo did not understand for a moment, and then he saw how the couples had stopped, one by one, and had turned toward the doorway. Caddo turned to see who was there. It was Tripp Garretson.

A horse by the hitchrack shifted nervously. A light afternoon breeze ruffled the aspens brooding at one end of the long stone porch. Caddo dropped the butt of his cigarette, grinding it morosely beneath his heel, and rose with a grunt from the chair he had been sitting in the last half hour. Hart came heavily out the front door, obviously carrying a heavy load, and Caddo's movement caught his eye.

"Wondered where you went," he said. "Why'd you leave?"

Caddo shrugged. "Wanted some air, I guess . . ."

"You looked sort of uncomfortable," said Hart. "Can't blame you, with all those fops."

"Why did she let Garretson stay, anyway?" said Caddo. "She knows who he is."

"Excitement," said Hart, dropping heavily into the chair beside Caddo. "You know Mora. Anything for a little excitement. She's as wild as that kid. It'll take some of a man to hold her, Caddo. I thought I could. I'm beginning to wonder."

Caddo shuffled his feet uncomfortably, staring at the worn toes of his boots. "I don't like it. Garretson has some reason for coming here."

Hart looked up stupidly. "You still worrying about that kid Irish can take care of himself Caddo. Didn't he prove it to you? I told you Mora'd do anything for excitement. Thought they were going to have a laugh? Thought maybe he would jump up in the air and whoop like an Indian or something?"

"I saw it," said Caddo, savagely. "I didn't think Mora would do a thing like that."

"You got a lot to learn about Mora," said Hart. "I guess it's the kid who got the laugh today, though, isn't it? He's in there making the rest of those men she runs around with looking like clumsy cows. He and Garretson have taken over the whole show . . ." he trailed off, staring at the porch floor a while. "How's it going, Caddo?" he said, finally.

"I understand there's a Crow buck in Sheridan wants to see me," said Caddo absently. "Might be that Comanche's been spotted up there again."

"You're not going," said Hart, rising clumsily and lurching forward to catch at Caddo's shirt front, blinking at him with bleary eyes. "Not after they tried to kill you that way, Caddo."

"I should think you'd be the first to want me to go," said Caddo. "I went over the books again yesterday with that accountant. You're bankrupt, Hart. If you don't sell out within the next few weeks, you won't even get from beneath this with a clean shirt. And you won't sell, unless Comanche is found for Oporto."

"I know, I know," said Hart, sinking into a drunken melancholy. "I'm no good, Caddo. I've drunk and gambled and played around till I haven't got anything left. I could have been rich, with what I had there. I could have been a big man in the Territory. Help me, Caddo. You've stuck by me. You're my best friend, Caddo. If Oporto buys me out it'll leave me with fifty-sixty thousand clear, anyway. You're my friend, Caddo, help me—" He leaned heavily against Caddo, patting his shoulder with one hand, breathing the thick sweet smell of peach brandy into Caddo's face. Suddenly he pulled back, eyes widening in a strange fear. "You aren't going, Caddo, not this time—"

"Hart," snapped Caddo, grabbing him by the lapels. "What do you know?"

MORA stopped Hart's words, coming from the door between Garretson and Irish, holding each by the arm. "Come on, Tommy. We're going to see some fancy riding. Tripp brought a horse he bet Irish can't ride."

There was a slack-lipped grin on the kid's face, and it struck Caddo what was happening. He started after them, opening his mouth to call Irish, then clamped his lips shut over the words. He waited until Mora had released Tripp's arm so the man could go in among the horses at the rack and unhitch a mean-looking roan with scarred flanks. Then Caddo came up be-

side Irish, speaking in a low, intense voice.

"You been drinking."

Irish turned toward him. "Sure. Why not? That corn tiswin the Crows brewed doesn't compare with this. Whyn't you try, Caddo? Loosen you up a bit."

Caddo caught his arm. "Don't be a fool, kid. Don't try any fancy riding like this. I don't want you hurt."

The boy's grin faded. "I won't get hurt."

"Oh, leave him alone, Caddo," pouted Mora. "He's all right. He only had a couple of drinks. You can't run his whole life."

"Sure," said Irish. "You can't run my whole life."

"I'm not trying to," said Caddo, desperately. "You're just not in shape for anything like this. Please, Irish, don't be a fool—"

That old, sullen withdrawal flashed through Irish. "Don't call me a fool."

"What's the matter, Caddo," said Tripp from the other side. "You aren't afraid, are you? I thought your boy could ride anything."

"I'm not *his boy,*" said Irish hotly.

Caddo turned toward the man. Tripp Garretson stood with his legs spread a little in that arrogant, sway-backed stance of his, both thumbs tucked into his gunbelt, a mockery lying turgidly in his strange, catty eyes. Dana Border had come with Garretson, and he took a step that moved him in beside Caddo, hunching his shoulders more deeply into the buffalo coat. A vagrant movement on the other side impinged itself into Caddo's consciousness. Though it was rigid custom that the handlers did not mix with their employers at affairs like this, Bob Ligget had accompanied Tommy Hart to take care of the horses. The movement had come from him, on that side. A nameless suffocation caught at Caddo, and he drew in a heavy breath.

"Tripp," he said. "The boy isn't riding that horse."

"Isn't that his business?" said Garretson. "Take the roan out to the corrals and saddle him up, Dana."

"Don't touch that horse, Dana," said Caddo.

They had a brutal war-bridle on the horse instead of bit and reins, and Dana turned to take the loose end of the hemp from Garretson's hand. Caddo took a swift step forward to reach out and tear the rope from Garretson's grip just before Border did. It put him in between the two men, and he no more than had the rope in his fist when from the corner of his eye he caught the change in Border's intent. The man had been holding his hand out to grab the rope. He left that hand out, but shifted his weight to the other side. The significance of that flashed through Caddo all in that instant, and the dull, sullen frustration which had been building in him the whole afternoon suddenly exploded.

He dropped the rope and whirled toward Dana, blocking the man's right hand blow with an upflung left arm and shifting on in to sink his right fist into Border's stomach. The man was softer than he had expected, beneath that buffalo coat, and his gasp came hot against Caddo's face. Caddo knew what was behind him, and he threw himself on in against Border, knocking the man back. The movement carried both of them two or three staggering steps, and Caddo heard Garretson's explosive breath behind him, as the man missed whatever he had been going to do. Caddo shifted his weight to sink his other fist into Border's belly, taking a savage satisfaction in the man's gasp of agony.

"Stop him," he heard Mora cry, "oh, stop him, somebody."

He knew Garretson would not miss this second time, and he whirled to meet it. He heard Border fall to the ground, behind him, and then the other man entered his vision, lunging at him. Caddo bent in low and tried to catch Garretson the same way he had Border. But Garretson was harder in the middle. He took the blow with a gasp, and then had his own blow, and bent in low like that; Caddo couldn't block it. Garretson's fist came in from above in a chopping, hammerlike way, to catch Caddo on the cheek, and it knocked his head down, putting his face into Garretson's hard, sweaty belly. He got his arms around the man's lean hips to keep from falling, and felt the writhe of steely muscle through those flanks as the man shifted his weight to follow the first blow with a second.

Caddo squatted and grabbed Garretson's calves and heaved upward. The fist struck the back of his neck, but its force was

aborted as Garretson went over backward, both his feet sliding down between Caddo's spread legs. Before Caddo could raise up, someone came in from the side. He sensed the swing of an arm more than saw it. A brilliant light flashed before his eyes, containing all the stunning agony in the world. Then it blinked out.

V

THE YEAR'S first snow had dropped a light mantle over the ground, and its chill struck Caddo as he awoke in his bunk. He lay there a moment, the squawking of a flight of ducks dim in his ears as they passed above, flying south. The throbbing pain in his head sharpened as he rose up, throwing the blankets off and swinging his legs to the floor. He felt Ligget's gaze on him from the other bunk, and raised his eyes. He saw the look in Ligget's eyes, and dropped his own, unable to meet that.

"You sure made a fool of yourself yesterday."

Caddo slipped into his levis, not answering, because he knew the man was right. He turned his back on Ligget, reaching for his shirt. The movement sent a new flash of pain through his head, and he rubbed it tenderly.

"Dana hit me with a gun?" he said.

"Dana?" said Ligget. The tone of his voice caused Caddo to turn and glance at him. Then Caddo became aware Irish Nyles' bunk was empty. Ligget saw his eyes on it, and shrugged. "What else do you expect? You never was exactly a little tin god to the kid, no matter how bad you wanted to be. Tripp's more the type to appeal to a boy like that. Wild and reckless and dangerous. They went into Sheridan about an hour after you left the Banner spread yesterday. I'll bet they put the reddest coat of paint on that town it's ever seen."

"Irish . . . with Tripp?" It came from Caddo incredulously. Then the full significance of it struck him, and he whirled around with his shirt tails flapping, to grab his gunbelt. Buckling it on, he ran out the door. He was halfway across the compound when he saw the horsebacker coming down the Sheridan road. Caddo turned that way, still running. They met by the corral, and Caddo caught at the boy's stirrup leather, staring up at his puffy face and bloodshot eyes.

"What happened?" he said. "What happened?"

Irish stared at him stupidly. "Nothing."

"But you went with Tripp!"

"Sure," said the boy. "What of it? I can go with whoever I please."

"I don't mean that," said Caddo. "Didn't anything happen?"

"We had a good time in town." The grin caught momentarily at the boy's mouth. "To put it mildly."

Caddo still could not believe it. "You mean...you just went into Sheridan..."

"And had a helluva good time," said Irish. "Yes. Now let go. I'm going in and get some shut-eye."

"Wait a minute" Irish had started to gig horse forward, but the tone of Caddo's voice stopped him. It had changed inside Caddo, now. It was only a dull, insistent anger. "You're still working for me. Whether we're out tailing Comanche or here at the outfit, you're working for me. Whether the hands want to go into town and get drunk every night or not is their own business, but either way, they're expected in the corrals at seven o'clock every morning. You're already half an hour late. I'll give you fifteen minutes for breakfast."

Irish stared down at him a moment, a sullen resentment flushing his face. Then he put his moccasined heels into the horse, moving it away, his seat in the saddle stiff and angry. Caddo held his hand, starting to say something, his face twisting. Then he dropped the hand, and stood there staring after the boy, a hollow, blank look to his eyes...

Fifteen minutes later, Irish was leading the bay from the barn. Caddo met him at the number one corral, speaking in a cold, impersonal way.

"You won't need the sulky today. He's through driving. Get one of those Mullen mouth Pelham bits out of the tack room and a light Cheyenne rig off the rack."

After Irish got the outfit, he dropped the Cheyenne saddle on the ground in order to put the bridle in. Caddo stood by, directing him in that same dispassionate way. "Take it easy, now. This isn't one of your rawhide hackamores. The snaffle

should rest on the lips. Keep that curb just above the tusk so the chain rests flat against the groove under his chin..."

"Tripp said you were pretty good with a gun," Irish said casually, heaving the saddle on.

"Not so rough, kid," Caddo told him.

"I used an old Ward-Burton mostly," said Irish, slipping the latigo through the cinch ring, jerking it up tight. "Never got got around to hand guns. Long as you're so all-fired enthusiastic about teaching me how to handle these Arabians, how about throwing a few lessons on the six-iron in?"

"What do you want them for?"

Irish was still turned toward the horse. "It might come in handy sometimes."

"In Tripp Garretson's string?"

Irish wheeled toward him defiantly. "Why not? What's wrong with Tripp? He knows how to have a good time."

CADDO gazed at him soberly, taking in a long breath, then letting the words out on that. "I thought we had something, kid. It isn't often a man comes along I like real well. I thought...that... maybe..." Irish turned back to the horse, tucking the free end of the latigo strap away and dropping the stirrup leather, and Caddo trailed off. He stared at the stiff, unyielding line of the boy's back a moment. "I guess I did make a fool of myself yesterday, didn't I?" he said, finally. Irish did not answer. Caddo drew in another breath, stepping toward the horse, and when he spoke again, it was in that casual, impersonal way. "Put the reins over his head so I can get them and hold him by the bridle while I mount. If he starts bucking or jumping around, take it easy on him."

He put one hand on the bay's withers, the other far back on its rump, and gave several small hops off the ground. The horse shied nervously but not too violently. Then, still hanging with his hands, he let his weight pull the animal over to one side to give him the sensation he would receive when he put his foot in the stirrup. This time he shied aside with more force, and tried to rear up.

"Come back here, you coon-footed cribber," yelled Irish, yanking him back down.

"Take it easy on his mouth, I told you," said Caddo, almost thrown off as the horse responded to the brutal pull with a jerk.

"Might as well teach him who rods this outfit now as later."

"Not that way, you don't teach him," Caddo told him, letting go of the horse. The release of his weight caused the animal to try and shift sidewards away from the boy's pressure on the bit. Irish jerked the bridle angrily toward him. It hurt the horse and he reared back again, whinnying shrilly and jerking his head from side to side in a growing frenzy.

This time the boy's jerk was even more cruel. "I'll pull your tusks right out—"

"Let go that animal," yelled Caddo, leaping at him. "I told you this isn't any bronc."

"I don't care what it is," Irish panted hoarsely, refusing to release the bit as Caddo tried to tear his hand away. "A little cold blood don't give him no right to act this way on me. Settle down, you snake-eyed stump-sucker—"

"Damn you," roared Caddo, "I told you," and his backhand blow caught the boy full across the face, knocking him backward across the corral to come up hard against the bars. Irish would have fallen if he had not caught at one of the rails. The released horse wheeled and ran across the corral, snorting and squealing. Irish straightened against the fence, wiping the back of one hand across his face. He stood there, staring at Caddo a moment, and the terrible, blank opacity that crossed his eyes struck Caddo, more than anything else, with the full significance of what he had done. He held out his hand, that twisted look in his face.

"Irish—"

"Never mind," said the boy, in a flat, dead voice. "I guess that's about all you can teach me. I guess I'll have to learn about the gun from somebody else. Garretson, maybe. And when I do, Caddo, you'd better not let me see you. I won't forget this. I won't forget it for a long time."

VI

THE GAUNT, thorny stems of wild rose bushes formed a dark pattern against the snow, here and there, and the fir trees huddled together in the hollows as

if to escape the morning chill. Caddo had made camp by a frozen stream in a grove of barren aspen, and he sought to warm himself by taking the last cup of his breakfast coffee in one long scalding gulp. Nearly three weeks of travel and bitter unending labor lay behind him, and he rose from his hunkers wearily, washing his tin cup out with snow, and rolling it along with the pot into his sougan. Then he stripped off his mackinaw and lifted the double-bitted axe from before the fire and moved downstream past the hobbled horses to seek more timber for the corral he had begun here the day before.

He found some good young spruce and went to work with the axe. Soon the sweat was soaking his shirt and streaming down the furrows on either side of his mouth into the scrubby beard he had grown. When he had felled half a dozen of the young trees, he lashed a dally about them and went back for a horse to drag them to the corral. He had built the pen in a sheltered cove of the creek, backed into a steep bank on the north end which broke the cruel wind from that side, protected in the other direction by thick growths of mountain oak. Three sides of the corral were already up, and with the freshly cut timber, he began lashing the bars of the fourth side to the stout cedar post uprights. He was lifting the last bar, when a horse raised its head and whinneyed.

Caddo whirled, dropping the axe. He had his gun out by the time the rider appeared, silhouetted a moment at the top of the steep bank above the corral, a slim figure turned bulky by a heavy sheepskin coat.

"Mora," he said blankly.

She turned the gaunted horse down the bank past the corral, and her pack animal came into view, following on a lead rope. She slid her saddle mount down the snowy bank and stepped off. They looked at each other a moment, and Caddo could find nothing to say, and knew she must feel the same way.

"You've had a ride," he muttered, finally.

"Comanche?" she said.

"Not yet," he told her. "I'm working something out. That Crow in Sheridan three weeks back said the horse had been sighted up in the Big Horns west of Lodegrass."

"And you're trying it all alone," she said, and then reached out a gloved hand impulsively. "Caddo . . . I've been wrong."

"Come all this way just to tell me that?"

"I thought it was excitement I wanted," she said. "I was young and wild and restless and I thought Tommy and the rest of those stupid, shallow fops he runs with were the kind of men who knew how to live and I . . . I . . ."

She trailed off helplessly, holding that hand out to him as if for aid. "What brought all this on?" he said, warily.

"I don't know, exactly," she shrugged. "Maybe it started that day you faced Ligget down when he wouldn't help Irish with the colt. I don't think he would have taken that from any other man. Or maybe the day of the party. Ligget told me you thought you made a fool of yourself then, Caddo. You didn't. Standing up against the bunch of them that way, for a kid? None of the others would have done it. If only Irish had realized why you were really doing it. He thought you were just trying to exercise more authority over him, trying to show him up as a kid in front of them all." She moved in closer. "I got to thinking of those things, these last three weeks, Caddo. More and more. It frightened me, somehow. It shook me. And finally I couldn't stand it any longer, knowing you were up here, all alone, facing this."

He shifted away from her deliberately, stifling an emotion within himself by a great effort, his words coming out stiffly. "Something been in my mind a long time. I got to ask you. You were the one who told Irish to put that horse in the stall where we kept the punchy colt."

"Ligget told me to tell Irish," she said. Then her jaw dropped faintly. "And you thought . . . I . . ."

She stopped again, unable to finish it, and he shrugged his shoulders, studying her face somberly. "What else was I to think, Mora? And when you let Garretson in to your party, that way."

"And you still think it," she accused him, stiffening. When he did not answer, she caught his arms, speaking swiftly, intensely. "Caddo, you've got to believe me. I don't know anything about this. Bob Ligget told me to have Irish put the horse in that stall. Is that what they were trying to do?"

"I don't know how Ligget fits in," said

Caddo. "Garretson was the first to reach me. He warned me not to find Irish Nyles."

"That's partly why I came up here," she said. "If Garretson's mixed up in it, then so is Irish, now. The boy's riding with Garretson."

Caddo's face paled, and he turned back toward the pole. He took up a strip of rawhide, staring at it without seeing it. He felt Mora move in closer behind him.

"What was it, about Irish, Caddo?" she said.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I'm almost old enough to be his father. Maybe that was it. A man needs something like that. He had a lot of good qualities. A lot of talents. It was nice to watch them come out, under the right treatment. A man needs something like that . . ." he trailed off, still staring at the rawhide.

After a while, she spoke, uncomfortably. "What have you got there?"

"I been building a string of pens like this all the way from the river into the Big Horns," he told her. "Each one has a roofed lean-to for shelter in case of bad weather. A horse could keep in good condition a week or so in a corral like this. I brought along about a dozen ponies from Hart's string of work animals. I'm going to plant one in each of those corrals. Comanche was last seen somewhere up in those hogbacks behind me. Soon's I'm finished here, I'm going to track him down. Then I'll drive him back in the direction of his corral. The horse here will be fresh when I reach it. I'll keep pushing Comanche as hard as I can right down this line of corrals. They're about twenty-five miles apart. You drive a horse a hundred and fifty miles without a chance to even stop and drink and he's going to be so played out a baby could snare him."

"Sounds a little risky to me," she said. "Do you think one man could drive him in a given direction that long?"

"I been working horses a long time, Mora," he said. "I figured the angles down pretty close. They work horses this way on water holes farther south with good results. The spookier a horse is of a man, the easier he is to drive. Just show up a mile away on one flank of him and he'll turn the other way. It will be easier to find him, too, with this snow. It's too deep on the toplands for him to stay there, and there's only a few good sheltered pastures left in the valleys."

"I'm going with you."

He smiled, in a faint, patient way. "No, Mora. It isn't for fun from here on in. Might a week go by without any sleep. Once I find him, there won't be any stopping till the end. A hundred-fifty miles on those terms is an awful lot of pasear."

"Two could drive him better than one," she said hopefully.

"I can't let you," he said.

She drew herself up. "You can't stop me."

INDIAN Notch cut through the Big Horns on top of a rugged hogback, swept by a ceaseless wind that blew the horses' tails between their legs and ruffled their manes with bitter, whining fingers. Caddo's eyes were squinted painfully in a raw, reddened face as he searched the lowlands below for any movement, and the girl was bent dispiritedly over in the saddle, eyes shut with weariness. They had ridden the ridges for three days now, hunting some sign of Comanche, without success. Caddo's saddle had not been thoroughly dry in a long time now, and it creaked soggily with his shift, as he turned toward her.

"I'm taking you back," he said.

She straightened up ,eyes flashing wide open. "Caddo, I told you, I'm not spoiling it for you now. You've got to finish it this time and you won't be able to if you do anything like that. I'm still good for . . ."

She had trailed off, her glance directed beyond him. After a moment, he turned to look down the snowfield into a bare patch of the valley where a row of conifers had protected a stretch of meadow from the snow. It was a moment before his aching eyes caught the movement.

"Deer?"

It came from the girl in a soft, breathless way ,and he waited a long time before answering. "Likely be more'n one if it was that. Let's drop down easy-like."

It was that way in him, too, now, as he eased his horse through the snow toward the trees, breathless and excited as a horse-runner with his first outlaw, all the exhaustion of the past days dissipated by the possibility of this. They reached the trees

and moved carefully through the limber pine. It seemed an endless stretch of time before Caddo spotted the movement again. This time they were close enough to recognize it, through the somber, white-floored lanes of timber. The protection afforded by this thick stand of trees on the upper slope had left a strip of meadowlands uncovered here, and the horse was nibbling at the sparse brown grass yet left in patches. Suddenly he raised his head, wheeling toward them, and they were close enough for Caddo to see his nostrils flutter. Then he had wheeled and plunged on down the valley and into the leafless scruboak covering its lowest section.

Caddo cast one glance at Mora, and then gigged his horse into a run that carried the animal across the meadow and into the oak. It was rough going here, with patches of freshly fallen snow lying deep in the coulees, and he had to slow a bit. Mora caught up with him in there, coming in beside him, and there was a strange expression in her face.

"That Comanche?"

He nodded. "What is it?"

"I don't know." She looked ahead, frowning vaguely. "Something wrong. Didn't you see it?"

"What?"

"I don't know. I told you. Something. I didn't get a good enough look. His face. His tail."

There was no time for that now, and he turned his horse to one side. "We can't hope to stick on his tail with these nags. Only way to drive him is to get on opposite slopes. That way he'll head straight down the valley. That'll open onto Badger String and my first pen. Think your horse'll last it?"

"Think yours will?"

He couldn't hold back the grin at that, and then she was gone, cutting off through the oaks. He rose out of the trees and gained enough height to see Comanche against the snow ahead, going up the opposite slope toward the ridge. Then Mora appeared on that slope, slightly higher than Comanche. The horse saw her and turned back down. Caddo kept out of sight in timber till Comanche had reached the bottom again and took a straight line out the valley . . .

It was close to midnight when they reached that first pen at Badger String, where Mora had first found him. Knowing she would be with him, he had left her pack horse here along with the one he had intended, and that gave them each a fresh mount. He tore the saddle off his jaded mount and heaved it on the new horse and turned the used up animal into the pen and swung aboard again as soon as he had given Mora's latigo a last tug, and they were off once more, seeking the slopes so they could sight Comanche against the white snow under the dying moon.

The excitement had worn off now and it was a steady, bitter pull, working on their nerve. The first wild run, almost killing their saddle mounts, had tired Comanche enough so that he was willing to settle into a steady trot now. With each of them riding an opposite slope that way, it was not hard to keep him running a pretty direct course down the valleys, not allowing him to stop long enough for a drink when they came to streams. They pushed him through Big Horn Canyon a little after dawn, reaching the second pen. Here was only one horse, and Caddo took it himself, as Mora's lighter weight had not tired her horse as much as he had his mount. It was a nightmare of snowfields and browning valleys and barren aspens along unnamed streams, now, and that running, trotting, walking, shifting shape of Comanche dark against the white carpets ahead.

At the third pen it was Mora who got the change. The ride was beginning to tell on her now, and he tried to get her to stop here, but she would not. Without time to argue, he turned the used-up animal into the pen and lifted the drop bar up, lashing it tight, all without having dismounted. They reached the fourth pen near evening, and Comanche was beginning to show definite signs of tiring. His tracks were closer together in soft earth and his efforts to seek escape on either side of the route they were driving him had become more infrequent with each passing hour.

BY THE time they reached the fifth corral, Caddo had gotten his second wind, and was sitting in a sort of lurid daze, feeling nothing but a numb determination to finish this now. They were in lower country now, with stretches of open terrain that would have let a fresher horse

to turn aside often seeking escape, but Comanche was going in a dogged, desperate trot. He had even ceased trying to stop at the watering places. Caddo knew it had settled down to its last stage.

The sixth and seventh corrals passed by and Caddo was waiting for Mora to fall from her saddle any moment now. They passed through the night, and by dawn, that terrible, ceaseless trot had turned into a walk. They reached the Little Horn River, and Caddo understood where Comanche was headed. He had reckoned on this to start with, and had predicated the line of his pens on that reckoning. Comanche was going to make his last stand where his master had, so many years ago.

Up the river they followed the stumbling, adamant Comanche, to where the eighth corral formed its dim pattern rising out of a thick morning haze that fogged the low swales here. Both were too exhausted to waste effort in speech now, and Caddo unsaddled Mora's animal for her and gathered himself to heave the sweaty corus on the back of the fresh horse, leaning against the animal as he hitched up the latigo. Then he helped her aboard, and climbed back on his own mount, spurring the weary beast ahead. They had lost sight of Comanche in the fog, but Caddo urged his horse ahead, drawing blood with his guthooks before he could get the jaded animal to gallop. It was the broken country Custer must have seen on his way into the Sioux camp, matted hummocks of cattail that dropped abruptly into coulees chocked with bitterroot and serviceberries, a stand of leafless haunted alders looming out of the dim haze, the thorny fingers of a bullberry bush rattling against the animal's legs.

Then, ahead, still in that dull, dogged walk, Comanche, appearing out of the groundfog, like one of the spirits of the Seventh returned to his defeat. Comanche's stride broke noticeably as he crossed a high bluff. He seemed about to halt. Then he moved on. Caddo and Mora passed the bluffs, crossed the open flats. Finally, ahead in the streamer of mist now being dissipated by a belated sun, Caddo sighted Custer Hill. He watched dazedly as Comanche leaned forward against the rising ground, climbing to the peak of the low crest, turning slowly around to face them. They drew to the bottom of the hill, near enough now to see how Comanche was trembling with exhaustion, barely able to keep his feet. He gave a feeble snort of defiance as they climbed the hill toward him. They both stopped their animals about the same time, staring at the horse. Caddo realized, dimly, what Mora must have meant back there.

"Funny," he said dully, still unwilling to believe it. "All the time I've been chousing the horse. Even when Irish and I had him there in the canyon. It was too dark to see. This is my first real close look at him. I had no idea."

"I told you," she said. "His head. The eyes are too small or something. All those colts you have at the Hart Farms show a dished-face."

"You're right," he said. "No full Arabian has a face like that. His back's all right though. They have one less vertebrae that makes them shorter than the other breeds. You can see that in him."

"His croup isn't level enough," she said. "And the tail's too long. I thought they had one or two less vertebrae there, too. Caddo, this can't be Comanche."

"On the contrary," said a soft, purring voice from behind them. "It can, very well, be Comanche."

CADDO'S saddle creaked as he turned. Tripp Garretson stood in the damp buffalo grass at the foot of the hill. Behind him stood Tommy Hart. It took a long moment for the full significance to seep through Caddo's exhausted mind. Finally he turned his horse around to face them, looking at Hart.

"It was you, behind this, then," he said emptily.

Hart made a vague, reluctant gesture with his hand. "I . . . I couldn't help it, Caddo. The thing grew by itself, somehow. You're right about Comanche. He's not pure Arabian. But he's got a little Suqwali blood in him somewhere. You can see it in his back, his action. Enough to start the rumor that he was an Arabian. The farms weren't going at all. It was Ligget's idea to take advantage of the Comanche legend. We thought about letting you in on it, but your principles were too obvious. We saw to it that Ligget always got the job of trailing those mares up here to be serviced by Comanche, instead of you."

"But the colts," said Caddo, a bitterness

entering his voice. "They were unmistakably pure."

"They were sired by pure studs," said Hart. "All that hokum about mating the mares with Comanche was just a show we put on to cinch things up. The colts wouldn't have been worth a tenth of the price we got without Comanche's name as their sire. You know what a gold mine the story has made for the Hart Farms. Arabians are too new to the West, despite their real value, to be worth much without something like that to sell them. When Oporto wouldn't buy the farms without capturing Comanche, I had to make it seem I was willing, on the surface. I hired Tripp to keep the horse from really being caught. If it came out that Comanche was just a cull, the whole thing would blow up in my face."

"That was you potting at us in Little Horn Canyon, then," Caddo asked Garretson.

"That's right," said the man. "We're really sorry you finally caught up with Comanche this way. We didn't think you could do it without Irish. I had some idea of getting Irish out of it that day at Mora's party, I even had something in mind to get rid of him when we rode into town. But he's a pretty tough kid. I saw it would be safer to let him break with you and step on our side of the fence. He's riding our wagon now, Caddo."

"Look," said Hart feebly. "Can't we make some sort of deal, Caddo? Surely you can see how this would ruin me if it got out. What's the difference? They're all good Arabians. Who cares if the sire wasn't Comanche? Everybody seems well satisfied."

Garretson waited a moment, watching Caddo's face narrowly. "I told you that wouldn't be the way, Tommy, with a man like Caddo. I told you how it would have to be, if he ever found out."

"But—Mora," said Hart emptily.

"It all depends on how much this means to you, Tommy," said Garretson. "You'll be finished if it gets out."

"But not . . . a woman . . . Tripp . . . not this way—"

Caddo comprehended, now, and couldn't help the shift he made in his saddle. "Don't," said Tripp, sharply. "You'll get your back filled."

CADDO turned far enough to see what he meant. Dana Border had come over the crest of the hill, a few yards to one side of Comanche. There was someone else with him.

"Irish," said Caddo, his voice filled with a profound defeat.

"Yeah?" The boy's tone was flat, unrelenting.

"Mora." Hart was trying again, his face pale. "Surely, you . . ."

"What about me?" she said edgily.

"You can't get around it, Hart," said Garretson. "She's in it for good."

"No . . . no," said Hart. "Can't you see it, Mora? Come down. We'll let you. You're one of us. You've been one of us. Surely you can see your way clear. What's it to you? Oporto will buy the farms and we'll be out from under it in a few weeks. They'll never find out. Nobody else could ever get Comanche."

"And if I came down," she said. "What of Caddo?"

"It's got to be that way," said Hart. "Don't you see? It's got to. Tripp told you why. With Caddo. It's got to be. But not you."

She let her eyes move over to Caddo, and he met them. "It's your chance, Mora. Don't be a fool."

"Yes," said Hart. "Come down, Mora, give us your answer."

"I'll give you my answer," she said, and it was in such a calm, dispassionate tone that the violent movement which followed it took them all by surprise. She raked her horse with her spurs before she was finished speaking, and jerked the reins violently against its neck at the same time. The horse screamed in surprised agony and leaped to one side, slamming into Caddo's horse. He felt her body come up against him, carrying him off the saddle. He struck the ground with Mora on top, rolling through the wet buffalo grass with the sound of screaming horses and the flat explosion of that first shot in his ears. They rolled into a shallow gully, Mora still on top, Caddo sprawled beneath her on his belly. He got a shoulder between them and rolled from under her body onto his back, and his arm was free enough to grab his gun when he saw where Garretson was.

The shot had evidently come from Border, above, who was running downhill.

Garretson had thrown himself aside to escape the bolting horses, and only now was coming up off his knees and throwing himself toward the gully.

"All right, Caddo," he shouted, and clawed out his Colt. Savage satisfaction twisted his face.

"All right, Tripp," Caddo said, and shot the man through the middle of his chest, and watched him take two more steps on through the soggy grass, that satisfaction changing to surprise as he tried to pull his half-drawn gun on out, and failed, and then fell over on his face. Border's gun began again from above, and Caddo convulsively tried to shift over on one side, pulling his gun across his hip. But Border had been firing as he threw himself to the ground, and was down now, invisible above the lip of the coulee. Irish was not in sight up there, nor Hart. Caddo grabbed Mora about the waist, half-carrying her down the cut toward a stand of scruboak choking the coulee between her and the river. Within the trees, they stopped, crouching to be completely hidden by the low growth, breathing heavily. Her face turned toward him, and he read it in her wide, dark eyes.

"I'll do it if I have to," he said between his teeth.

"You can't," she sobbed. "You loved him like a son, Caddo. You can't and you know it."

"I'll do it if I have to," he said again, in that hollow, bitter way. But inside him, like an insidious voice, were her words, you can't do it and you know it, you can't do it—

They both wheeled toward the sound outside the fringe of trees within which they crouched. There was still some ground fog left, swirling through the soggy, furrowed trunks, but the sun was growing stronger, and it drew a sweat from Caddo, as he leaned toward the noise. Irish? Something clogged in his throat, and he tucked his chin in to swallow.

"Caddo . . ."

It was Mora's voice behind him, a small, hopeless, pleading sound. He blinked his eyes, wondering if he could, if it were possible, for a man—

Then it was the other noise, behind them, from the river end of the coulee. He started to turn that way, and then

DON'T LET THEM DOWN!

WINNING THE WAR required a mighty effort in a common cause. Americans—many of them—made that effort. The war was won. But we still have common causes.

There is, for one, the support of the USO serving our armed forces, greatly reduced from the wartime Army and Navy but still large and still much needed for a job that must be done. Much of our Army and Navy today is new and young. USO and the lift to morale it gives is as valuable to these youngsters as it was to the veterans. The clubs and camp shows and work in Hawaii, the Philippines, and other Western Hemisphere outposts should be continued. Nor must we ever forget how much this organization can mean to our thousands of wounded and sick of the armed forces who are still in hospitals.

The war is over but not the boredom and the loneliness which are a part of war and its aftermath. There the USO can and does help. That is why it deserves a generous contribution from every American, grateful to those who have honorably served and are honorably serving their country in the Army and Navy.

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FAIRFAX DOWNEY

stopped, because he caught the dim movement in the foggy trees before him. The sun caught brightly on yellow hair. Caddo's arm jerked upward involuntarily, but the sight was gone as swiftly as it had come, blocked by the gnarled trees. He held the gun stiffly in his fingers, calling in a soft, hoarse voice.

"Kid? Don't be a fool. You didn't come for this. You didn't know what you were riding for, did you? Tell me you didn't. Don't come in, kid. I can't have you gunning like this with Mora in it. She's right beside me, Irish. Tell me you're quits. Tell me you won't . . ."

"I told you what I'd do back in the corrals that last time." It was the boy's voice.

"We were friends once, Irish."

"Tripp and I were friends, too," said Irish.

"You got your dally hitched on the wrong leg. He came at me . . ."

"He's dead back there. He taught me how to use a gun, Caddo. I'm going to use it now."

"Mora—"

"Tell her to get out of it. I don't care about her. Just you and me, Caddo."

"She can't, Irish. Someone's coming in from the other side. Don't do it, kid, don't make *me* do it . . ."

"I'm coming, Caddo."

THERE was the crunch of undergrowth beneath those moccasins, soft, insistent. Then Mora shifting against him with a small, choked, indrawn breath. Then it was that flash of sun on yellow hair again, and Caddo's arm came up.

"Irish," he cried, like that, and it wasn't in him.

The instant they stood there staring at each other seemed the longest measure of time Caddo had ever spent, and then Irish Nyles' gun boomed.

There was a muffled echo, aborted by the trees, and Caddo wondered why he felt no pain. Then he saw the boy's gun was not quite lined up on him. He heard the sound Mora made from behind, and turned part way around. Dana Border was crouched on his knees, hugging himself with a grimace of awful pain, and the gun he would have used on Caddo lay at his feet. Caddo turned back to Irish. The boy put his gun away.

"Tripp didn't teach me very good anyway," he said, uncomfortably. "You could've had me if you'd wanted."

"Irish," shouted Caddo, and caught him by the shoulders as he came forward, pounding him on the back and grinning, and Irish was grinning too, and neither of them knew what to say.

"Tommy?"

It was Mora's voice, from behind Caddo, and Irish answered her. "Hart won't cause us any trouble. He's sitting out by the river, afraid to make a move for fear he'll run into Caddo. He's through and he knows it."

"Yeah." Caddo sobered. "I guess he is. Along with the Hart Farms. When this gets out, a horse from there won't be worth a Crow buck's short bit."

"The farms wouldn't have to be through," she said. "As much money as Tommy's made there, he's drunk and gambled it away to the point of bankruptcy. It will go into receivership. A man could get it from the hands of the receivers pretty cheap. If people knew it was being run honestly again, it wouldn't take long to build up a market on a different, more solid basis. You've been putting it away in the sock ever since I knew you, Caddo, for a time like this. It's your chance. If you haven't enough, there are a dozen men around Sheridan who would loan you the balance, including me."

He looked at them both, the thought of it warming him, somehow, till he felt a faint, excited flush in his face. "I'll need two things," he said.

"What's that?"

"I won't be satisfied with any moon-eyed wrangler to handle those horses," he said, looking directly at Irish. "I'll want a man I can make the best ramrod in the Territories."

Irish dropped his eyes to the ground in a pleased discomfort. "I'll come, Caddo."

"And I won't be satisfied living in the big house by myself," said Caddo, turning toward Mora. "I'll want a woman there to make things complete."

Mora did not drop her eyes from his. "I'll come . . . Caddo," she said.

Rattlers Make Poor Neighbors

By Giff Cheshire

Off the wall hook came Old Shep Darby's six-guns . . . aching to fill the hot-lead hollow left by a bullet-shy son.

OLD SHEP DARBY felt the needling of anger as he listened to the inevitable strains of young Dunc's harmonica. The cowman sat in a rocker on the shaded side porch of the Diamond D ranch house, while his son rode into the yard on the blind side of the lilac bushes. Shep stopped rocking and scowled when Dunc came into view, hands cupped over the wailing mouth harp, eyes dreamy, the pony neck-reined and picking its own way.

There had been a time when Shep secretly approved of Dunc's musical prowess and his innate gentleness, traits that had come from Shep's wife, who had died bringing Dunc into the world. Those things had been winning in a young sprout, or in a fuzz-cheeked adolescent. But Dunc was now twenty-five, and had never changed.

The pony stopped automatically at the steps, and Dunc quit playing and looked at his father, grinning.

Shep scowled. "Curly Bates tells me Varley Heinz is watering at the Ten Gush springs."

"Yep."

"You tell him he could?"

"Nope."

"You mean he just moved in on us?"

Dunc looked thoughtful. "Not exactly. Whipple Creek's run dry, and he started using the springs, and I didn't like to tell him to stop."

Fury rose in Shep Darby, but he held it back. For fifteen years he had groomed Dunc to step into his own shoes, not

only in running the Diamond D but in maintaining the ranch's leadership in the valley. Though his temperament came from his mother, the boy had got his tall, powerful body and panther-like coordination from his father. Shep had taught him to ride anything that walked, to use gun or fists with equal skill, and all the perplexing ins and outs of the cattle business. Four years ago, when Dunc was twenty-one, Shep had turned the Diamond D over to him. And the boy had turned out to be a first rate harmonica player.

The old man looked at him coldly. "When you planning to stop this Varley Heinz?"

Dunc lifted his eyebrows. "Stop him from what?"

"From crowdin', blast it! I keep my hands off, but that don't mean I keep my eyes shut! In the six months Heinz has been over on the Hook he's chased Tom Bight off the summer graze Bight used for twenty years! He's killed nine of Turk Snyder's steers for strayin' into his territory! And he's gunned Freddie Townsend in the saloon in Three Points, because Freddie objected to his drunken bullyin'!"

"I know," Dunc answered thoughtfully. "But that's their affair."

Old Shep rose from his chair, his stooped body clear bent over with rage. "Their affair? I don't need to remind you that for thirty years the Diamond D's paced this valley! It's stood for law and order. And folks has looked to it for directions!"

"Yeah," Dunc admitted. "Folks've been askin' me what we're going to do about Varley Heinz. But the only thing he's done to us is use Ten Gush water without asking permission. But if he'd asked we'd have told him to go ahead. A good neighbor couldn't do anything else."

"That's just the point!" Shep exploded. "It was Heinz' way of showing contempt for the Diamond D! You can't let it pass, Dunc! Five years ago a man of his stripe wouldn't have had the guts to start stuff like that in the valley!" He halted momentarily, realizing the dig he had unconsciously given Dunc in pointing out that it was only under the boy's management that such things could happen. Shep sighed. "It's like this, kid. It's now or never. If Heinz gets set, more like him will come in, and they'll flock together. Won't be long before they'll be callin' the tunes. Then there'll be real trouble—bloody trouble! We had a war when you was just a baby, and we drove out the snakes. Rattlers don't make neighbors! Since then we never let a nest get started. Heinz has been buzzin' his tail for six months. The time to fix him is now!"

DUNC could be stubborn when he wanted, and he shook his head. "I know Heinz is a trouble maker and plenty crooked, besides. But I can't see what right we've got to run him outta the country."

"Because the time to fix trouble is when it starts a-buildin'!"

The younger man's face had gone serious, finally. "Look, Shep. You draw a line down through the center of things. On one side you set what you hate. On the other what you like. Black and white. And you go whole hog for both. I don't figure it's right to hate things just on general principles!"

"If a man didn't hate." Shep answered hotly, "he wouldn't last long in this world! Decent men've got to hate the stripe of Varley Heinz and show no mercy! Just you sit suckin' your thumb another six months or so and you'll see what I mean!"

"What can I do?"

"The first thing is to give the Diamond D back its face by tellin' Heinz he can't use our water or cross our land without askin' permission! The next is to warn him he can either cut out his bully-boy ways or get run out of the valley. And last, if he don't listen, is to run him out or put him and his tough hands under sod. Call that hate if you want to, but I call it a decent man's duty! And that's the way it was here for thirty-five years!"

It was not often that Dunc lost his temper, but Shep saw he had riled the boy. Dunc stiffened in the saddle and picked up the reins. "And I claim a man should tend to his own business and not go on the prod until he can't help himself!" He gigged the horse and rode out of the yard.

Old Shep filled his pipe thoughtfully. He had been middle aged when he mar-

ried, and now he supposed that the considerable difference in ages made it difficult for them to see eye to eye. He was convinced that Heinz had already been emboldened to the extent that he was going to be hard to handle, and it hurt the old man to realize that the Diamond D had lost its leadership of the valley and let it come about.

It was a familiar pattern that Shep Darby had seen many times in the raw days of frontiering. A community either policed and purged itself with an iron will or it fell prey to the ilk that knew neither ethics nor mercy. Like weeds, these forces got a start and unless eradicated they thrived and spread until they took the whole caboodle.

There was no getting Dunc to see that, and Old Shep hated to interfere. He had been biting his tongue for weeks to keep from saying what he had said to Dunc just now. The boy was a top-rate cowman, making as much money out of the spread as Shep ever had. Shep had leaned over backward to let the boy have the whole say about it. And he would have given one of his few remaining years if Varley Heinz had never come into the valley.

At supper that night Dunc was preoccupied and quiet, and old Shep hoped he had at least set the boy to thinking. That night, as they sat on the shaded side porch, Dunc didn't blow his harmonica, as usual. Shep didn't raise the question again. He had said his piece. His day was nearly over, and Dunc was the one who would have to live in the valley for so many years yet, and the boy had to make his future according to his own dictates.

Yet the next day and the next nothing happened, and within a week Dunc was back to playing his infernal mouth harp as he rode about the ranch. A deep despair settled over old Shep. Finally, unable to contain himself longer, he saddled a horse and rode over to Ten Gush springs.

As he topped a rise, a quarter of a mile from the sweet water pools, he halted his horse, his eyes narrowing.

The springs were fenced!

So Dunc had acted. Shep rode on down the slant, feeling years lift from his shoulders. The fence was of barbed wire, and there was a wooden gate with a sign tacked to it. Shep's sight was dimming, and he had to ride up close to read it. When he had, he swayed so he reached for the pommel to steady himself. The sign read:

KEEP OUT
V. N. Heinz, Hook Ranch

SHEP slid to the ground, trembling with fury, and strode to the gate. He ripped the sign loose and threw it with all his strength. Then he set to work, an outraged demon of destruction. The fence posts had been driven deep with a maul and he had no wire cutters, but he managed to wrench the gate loose from its hinges. Then he swung into saddle and went thundering for home to bring a crew and tools to finish the job.

He guessed that the fence had been up at least two or three days, for the ground around it had been deeply tromped by what had likely been thirsty Diamond D cattle. It was impossible to suppose that Dunc did not know about it, for if not himself one of the boys would certainly have seen it. Why hadn't they done anything about it?

A kind of malicious satisfaction came to Shep as he burnt the trail to the home ranch. This was exactly what he had tried to warn Dunc against. Heinz figured he had the Diamond D buffaloed. And he'd keep inching ahead until somebody with guts up and stopped him.

It was nearing noon when Shep pounded into sight of the ranch house, and the boys were coming in to eat. The old cowman descended upon them like a hawk on a flock of frightened chickens. Dunc had ridden into the yard just ahead of him.

"How long've you jelly-backed jiggers known about the fence Varley Heinz threw around the sweet water pools?" he roared.

The hands bit their lips tight, their eyes avoiding his. Dunc looked at him calmly.

"It's been there a couple of days, I reckon."

"And why haven't you done anything about it?"

Dunc started to twist himself a cigarette, and Shep saw his fingers weren't even trembling.

"Varley Heinz has got a dozen gun-

slingers on his payroll," Dunc said, tightening his tobacco sack string with his teeth. "He'd like nothing better than to have us come a-smokin'!"

"And you don't aim to?"

"Since you ask me, no—I don't."

Old Shep's strength seemed to ooze out of him. He could tell from the faces of the men that Dunc had held them back. He knew they would follow Dunc if the boy asked them to. They were hoping old Shep would ask them to follow himself. Yet suddenly the old man realized that he couldn't do that. When he turned the ranch over to Dunc he had said: "She's all yours, boy. I've tried to teach you the business, and how a man ought to live. But there ain't no strings attached. I hope you'll like my way of doing things, but any changes you want to make are all right. She's yours, lock, stock and barrel."

The crew dissolved, heading to wash up for noon dinner. After regarding his father for a long moment, Dunc turned without speaking and followed them. Shep wheeled and stomped across the yard to his habitual post on the side porch.

He began to grow uneasy about what he had done out at the sweet water springs. He was inclined to agree with Dunc that Varley Heinz was trying to promote gun trouble. When Heinz discovered what had happened to his gate, he doubtless would strike again. Next time it might be in a way Dunc could not sidestep.

The old man's disappointment in his son was keen. In all the years nothing had ever happened to indicate that Dunc was a coward. Old Shep could remember many times in which the boy had shown cool courage and dexterity. So Dunc's passivity had to spring from principles, and they were principles Shep could neither understand nor tolerate.

It was shortly after supper when a puncher called Whitey Vaine came smoking into the yard, and he hurried to old Shep, rather than to Dunc.

"There's a good dozen Diamond D steers been shot at the springs!" he reported furiously. "Looks like somebody tore the gate off, and the steers got in to drink and some Hook men must've gunned 'em!"

Shep nodded, his eyes narrowing. He had expected something. He heard the clump of bootfalls, and Dunc came out of the house. He had heard.

Dunc regarded Vaine closely. "All right, Whitey. Go over and get your supper."

The puncher looked at him in disbelief. "Ain't we going over to the Hook?"

The younger Darby shook his head. "No. We're not."

Shep managed to hold his tongue until Vaine had stomped off across the yard. Then he fixed Dunc with a cutting stare. "And when Varley Heinz decides he wants the Diamond D brand, we hand it over, huh?"

"No, of course not."

"That's what he'll go after, eventually. If you let him take the springs, you're sunk!"

THE younger man spread his fingers impatiently. "We never owned the springs. The Diamond D's got lots of water. When you get right down to it, the Hook needs Ten Gush more than we do. They only have Whipple Creek, and it dries up in the hot season. When Charley Longstreet run the Hook you always let him water outta Ten Gush in the summer."

"By mutual agreement!" Shep snorted. "Charley Longstreet never put a Hook critter on Diamond D graze without asking permission."

Dunc turned away with a gesture of hopelessness.

By bed time Shep Darby had decided what to do. He was an old man, and at best death was not far away. It chilled his marrow to think of the Diamond D going to pieces instead of living on after he was gone. He could not hope to clean out the Hook singlehanded. But in his years he had learned that it would not be necessary. If Varley Heinz were removed from the scene, maybe one or two of his closest associates, the infamous outfit would fall to pieces. At least it was likely to, and that was the best plan old Shep could think of.

Having decided on it, he began to plumb ways and means. An old codger, riding into a rattler nest like that, would have his best chances if he picked a most unlikely time for it. Varley Heinz would be ex-

pecting retaliation for the slaughter of Diamond D steers, and might keep his outfit on the alert through the night. The best time to strike would be at dawn, when the guards, if any, were sleepy and all hands feeling an easing of tension.

Before he went to bed, Shep examined his brace of cedar-handled sixes, which, though they had not been used for years, were kept cleaned and oiled and loaded. The grips felt familiar in his hands, but his fingers, he knew, would be stiff and slow. The last thing Shep heard before he dropped off asleep was the distance-muted lilt of Dunc's harmonica.

Two hours before dawn Shep rose and dressed and made his way down to the pole corral, where he caught and saddled a horse. He had even beat the cook out of bed, and when he rode out of the darkened Diamond D compound he had to steel himself against pausing to take one last look around. He gigged the horse and sloped out in the direction of the Hook.

Hook headquarters were a group of ramshackle buildings set in a little hollow beyond a string of broken buttes that separated the two spreads. Old Shep waited on one of these buttes until he could see the buildings beginning to emerge in the dawn. The long wait had chilled him, but when it grew light enough to see a little he left the horse and started forward on foot. The sixguns were thonged down, now, and his forearms brushed the handles as he plunged ahead, and he knew that if an outguard detected him it meant an instant fight for his life.

Twice he thought he saw something moving, and he ducked into cover to wait, but nothing further developed. Shep skulked on. He gained the outer fences of the several corrals, and picked a devious course to the cover of the big stable. There abrupt movement sent him headlong behind a stack of baled hay. He raised up cautiously to peer over the top.

He saw three figures emerge from behind the saddle shed across from him and move cautiously toward the main house, sixguns in hand. In the half-light it was impossible to identify them, and Shep wondered if it were a trio of Diamond D punchers who had decided to take matters in their own hands, for the advance looked high-keyed and hostile. The trio broke up, a man moving around to each side of the house, with the third stepping onto the porch and heading toward the front door. The man pushed the door open stealthily and went inside.

The development threw Shep's own plans out of kilter. It was strange that these three had got so far into the heart of the Hook without setting off an alarm, unless they had already overcome what guards had been posted. Shep decided that this had been the case, for his own unimpeded approach had surprised him.

Then gunfire erupted, and Shep placed it as being inside the house. Still not knowing who he was siding, Shep plunged out through the stable door, a gun in each tight-clenched fist. He slid in behind a rain barrel standing under the eave of the cook shack, across from the door of the big bunk house.

More shots were expoding in and around the big house, and as Shep expected it was only a couple of minutes until the door of the bunk house burst open and half-dressed but well armed Hook hands came pouring out. Shep let out a ringing cry of challenge and opened fire.

From there on it was a feverish, half unreal affair. Two or three men got out, and Shep dropped two more in the doorway, but he kept five or six more penned in the bunk house, sending instant lead at any sign of movement. One or two who had got away had found cover across the way, and slugs began to rip into the rain barrel.

Years rolled off Shep Darby as he made his stand, knowing that if the bunk house spilled its contents the trio he had seen move against the big house would be gone goslings. Yet he doubted that he could keep them dammed there very long, for he had forted up hastily and one lucky shot could remove him from the fracas. He cursed his failing eye sight.

There was still shooting at the big house, and by now Shep had decided that whoever it was had made an attempt to surprise Varley Heinz and his segundo, Pete Gunnerson, who slept there, hoping to get them before the bunkhouse was aroused. The shooting meant Heinz and Gunnerson had been warned in time to

put up a fight. Shep Darby knew he had to keep these gun-hands immobilized, no matter what it cost.

IT was going to cost plenty, in a minute. Those in the bunk house were holding back a bit, hoping one of the escaped Hook men would remove the menace to them. But a lucky glance and a quick shot on Shep's part put the man who was trying to sharp shoot him out of the fight. The old man knew that the next thing would be a charge from inside.

He reloaded his guns, fingers fumbling and gaze never straying from that door. He grew aware that the silence was general, and it dawned on him slowly that the fight at the big house was finished, though there was no knowing how it had turned out.

Then half a dozen figures loomed and came charging out into the open. Firing calmly, Shep dropped a couple of them but he knew that it was only a matter of seconds until he would be riddled with lead.

It never happened. An eruption of gunfire opened to the right, forcing the Hook bunch to scramble for a new cover. Shep rose and got his first glimpse of one of the trio he had been siding, astonishment going through him. It was Jack Purdue, the U.S. Marshal!

After that there was too much lead in the air to do anything but lay in his fire where he saw a chance, and Shep concentrated on that. He was not aware that it was over until he saw Purdue coming toward him, a broad grin on his face.

"You can put away that hogleg now, Shep!" the marshal boomed. His hat had been knocked off, and there was a ribbon of blood running down his temple and across his cheek.

Shep moved out into the open, his legs trembling suddenly, for the first time amazed that he was alive, not even touched. Dead and wounded men were everywhere. Dick Price, a deputy marshal, had rounded up the two sound ones and he came toward Shep, herding them.

"Looks like we got off lucky," Shep breathed.

The marshal's face went serious. "Not entirely. Dunc's bad hit."

"Dunc?" Shep stared at him in amazement.

Purdue nodded. "He got it up at the house. It was his idea, hunting back through old dodgers to see if we could find a legal charge against Heinz. We found one. The jigger was wanted for murder in Texas. We decided dawn was the best time to try to arrest him. When he saw it was the law, Heinz took his chances on shooting it out. Him and Gunnerson's both dead. . ."

It was the next day, and they had got Dunc back to the Diamond D ranch, and the sawbones had been out to patch him up. The boy had a hole in his left leg and another in his right shoulder, but Doc Sprey promised Shep that, with care, he'd be up and around again in a matter of a week or so. There was a great gladness in the old man's heart the first evening that Dunc felt like talking. Twilight was gathering, and Shep sat by his bed.

Dunc grinned at his father. "You were right, Shep. I should've seen it months ago and put a stop to Heinz. Folks waited for me to tip the nod, just like they'd always looked to you. But I kept my eyes shut until it had gone so far it'd cost other folks' blood to stop it. I couldn't take the neighbors or my own crew into a fight my own blindness was responsible for. It was up to me. Yet it didn't seem right for me simply to ride into Hook gunning for Heinz. I figured a jigger like him must've had plenty to answer to the law for. So I went to see Jack Purdue, and he swore me in as a deputy. I felt right, then."

There was a long silence. Old Shep felt contentment seeping into his bones.

After a while Dunc said, "Shep, how's to get me my harmonica?"

Shep got up. The boy had a lot of thinking to do, as a man of responsibility always had, and old Shep remembered that he himself had always liked to whittle his way through a problem. In deep understanding Shep fetched the mouth harp, and it was lilting sweetly presently when he went out to the side porch to rock while evening gathered.

THE REAL "WILD" WEST

CREEDE, COLO.

...ONE OF THE WILDEST TOWNS THE WEST HAS EVER KNOWN...DURING ITS BOISTEROUS HEYDAY, A NATIVE POET WROTE --- **"IT'S DAY ALL DAY IN THE DAYTIME, BUT THERE IS NO NIGHT IN CREEDE!"** HERE SILVER MINERS SWEATED BY DAY AND DRANK AND FOUGHT BY NIGHT.

WALTER GALLI

OF ALL THE NOTORIOUS SALOONS AND DANCE HALL'S, THE MOST FAMOUS WAS "**BOB FORD'S DANCE HALL**". NOW, THAT BOY **FORD** RATES A LINE OR TWO--ACCORDING TO THE SONG, HE IS KNOWN AS "**THAT DIRTY LITTLE COWARD WHO SHOT MR. HOWARD**"-- MR. HOWARD BEING **JESSE JAMES**! **FORD** HIMSELF WAS ULTIMATELY SHOT AND KILLED IN "SOAPY SMITH'S JOINT" BY A GENT NAMED **KELLY**--WHO GOT HIM WITH BOTH BARRELS OF A SHOTGUN WITHIN **10** FEET !! 1892.

FORD'S FUNERAL WAS SOMETHING --ALL GAMBLERS, ALL DANCE HALL GIRLS WERE THERE-- AND SO WERE ALL THE BARTENDERS IN TOWN! ONE SALOON WAS SO BUSY BARKEEPS HAD TO WORK ON HORSEBACK!

BARBED WIRE WAR

By CHARLES IRWIN

When you're fence-bustin' bound, bring your salivatin' frou, runs the range code. Jim Elliott never heard of it.

DEVIL'S ROOST, Jim Elliott decided after his first brief survey of the block long settlement, was pretty much the same as every other Texas frontier cowtown. It had its dusty, wagon-rutted street which lay like a canyon between two rows of false-front buildings. It had its general store, its post-office, barber shop, and the usual abundance of saloons.

From the saddle, Jim Elliott silently watched two men unload an express wagon. The cargo consisted of huge spools of barbed wire. The expressmen were rolling them into Westbrook's General Store.

With the rumbling of each spool as it rolled up the improvised ramp, Jim Elliott's memory became deluged with what had gone before—the thunder of rifle and six-gun, the ripping apart of property, death and destruction to man and beast.

He shuddered to think what would come now—if this thorny demon of cold, ruthless steel was not corraled, roped and hog-tied—and branded for the purpose its inventors had originally intended.

Elliott watched a tall man step from the General Store. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up revealing muscular arms. "All right, boys," he ordered around a half smoked cigar. "I want this load stacked in the back corner."

Elliott clicked up his buckskin mare, headed her toward the man.

"Howdy, mister," he said. "You own this store?"

The man turned to him. He was standing on the porch. With Elliott in the saddle their eyes were about on a level. The storekeeper was a barrel chested fellow, with heavy jowls and sharp black eyes. About thirty-five, Elliott figured.

"Yep," the man said.

"You Westbrook?" Elliott asked.

"Right," he was told. "Dave Westbrook."

Elliott reached in his vest pocket, creased a paper, and emptied a mound of durham on it. "Mebby you can help me," he said slowly.

Dave Westbrook was about to reply. Just then hoofbeats sounded. Two cowpokes, wearing leather chaps, were spurring in fast from the north end of town.

"Mebby so," Westbrook said. He laughed shortly. "But not right now, mister."

"No?" Elliott paused while licking his cigarette. "What's the trouble?"

"Them two buckos," Westbrook told him, "are Bat Riley an' Del Miller. They ride for the Mogul Land and Cattle Company."

The two cowpokes hitched up on the corner. Without wasting any time, both men dismounted, swung through the batwings of the Cowhorn saloon.

"So?" Elliott said innocently.

"So look up on that knoll," Westbrook pointed.

About a mile away he saw a swirling cloud of dust. He figured about six riders caused it.

"That," said Westbrook, "will be Clem Wilkins an' his boys."

"That bad?" Elliott inquired.

"It ain't good," Westbrook told him.

Suddenly Jim Elliott found himself alone. The street was deserted. The expressmen had ducked into the General Store. So had Westbrook.

This meant one thing—gun ruckus. Elliott tossed away his unlit quirly, booted his mare to the Cowhorn Saloon. He tied beside the two lathered broncs.

The be-chapped cowpokes were bellied up to the rear section of the Cowhorn's L-shaped bar. The burly, mustached barkeep set a quart between them, plus a couple

of shot glasses. The saloon was deserted, aside from this trio.

WHEN Elliott's tall figure loomed in, both cowpokes tensed. They made a go for their guns, eyed this wide-shouldered newcomer narrowly.

Shoving his dusty Stetson back on brown hair, Elliott walked to them. "There's five-six riders trailin' you in from the north," he said. "If they got gun business with you wrangler, you'd best duck pronto."

The punchers stared at him. Elliott was only thirty. But on the Texas frontier he might be considered an old timer. And from his feline way of moving, a canny gunman might know that he understood how to handle the matched pair of .45 Colts which hung low on his lean hips.

The two punchers looked six or eight years younger. Both were medium tall, built lean and sinewy.

"We know they're comin'," one of them growled. "But Bat Riley ain't duckin' from no passel o' fence-cuttin' nesters, mister."

The other nodded. "Yuh can add Del Miller's name to that," he agreed.

They poured their shots with nervous hands, downed the whiskey.

"No?" Elliott's firm lips twisted in a deriding smile. "Your broncs out there wheeze like they came off a middlin' fast run. What's the matter—won't they go any farther?"

The youngster named Del Miller banged down his empty glass. "We ain't runnin' from nobody!"

The barkeep swung around from his till. "Who's trailin' you boys?" he inquired, and placed his bearlike paws on the counter.

"Wilkins," Riley told him.

"Yeah?" The barkeep looked at him squint-eyed. "Well, if they been cuttin' fence again, how come *they're* doin' the chasin'?"

Riley and Miller had re-filled their glasses. They grinned into them, then tossed them down.

"Get out!" the barkeep barked. "If there's any shootin' in here, *I'll* do it."

"Aw, Jake," Miller argued. "It'll be over quick. Bat an' me can pick off the mangy coyotes two at a time as they come in." He snapped down another drink.

"Get out!" Jake repeated. "Take your medicine on the street."

But this meant certain death, and the cowpokes knew. Riley clawed for his gun.

Before he could grip it, Jake grabbed the whiskey bottle. He brought it crashing along Riley's skull. Riley let out one roar of pain before he went out, and down. The bottle broke, and left Jake holding only the neck.

Meanwhile, Miller turned on the now defenseless barkeep. His gun was halfway from the holster when suddenly he groaned. His knees buckled, and he slumped to the floor. Elliott stood over him, one gun drawn.

"Them .45's make a purty good club," Jake remarked. He peered over the counter. "Out cold, both of 'em. Much obliged, stranger."

Elliott holstered his Colt. "You got someplace we can deposit these two roosters while they're restin'?" he asked. "We better get 'em hid before their little playmates arrive."

"Shore," Jake said. He jumped over the bar. "Let's drag 'em in the back room."

After this was done, Jake said, "Just who are you, stranger?"

Six were the riders who hitched outside. Before Elliott had time to answer, they came roaring through the batwings.

Elliott faced them from the center of the saloon, boots spread slightly, arms hanging easily at his sides.

The mob halted. Six pairs of eyes swept the barroom.

"Where are the skunks?" the leader demanded. He was a six-foot-six man, clad in ragged, dirt-caked overalls. A two hundred fifty pound nester, he carried a Winchester.

"If you mean Riley an' Miller," Elliott said, "they're gone."

"Yeah?" the big fellow said. "They can't be far. Their broncs is still hitched outside."

"I'm askin' you men to go, too," Elliott stated.

The nester glanced at Jake. "Who's this jigger?" he asked, jerking a thumb toward Elliott.

"I dunno," Jake said, "but you better do like he says, Clem."

Elliott locked eyes with the big fellow.

"So you're Clem Wilkins," Elliott said. "He-coon of the fool plowmen around here."

"If it's anything to ye, yeah," Wilkins growled. "Who are you?"

Not answering, Elliott looked the mob over. Three of the men were nesters. One of them packed an ancient muzzle-loading long rifle, another an old single-shot horse pistol. These wouldn't be much good to fight men armed with sixguns. Wilkin's Winchester, however, was a good weapon.

Two of the mob were obviously small-time cattlemen. They packed a sixgun apiece.

The sixth man was short, stocky. A two-gun man. He had been looking closely at Elliott. And Elliott kept an eye on this man, too.

CLEM Wilkins raised his rifle a fraction. "We got no fight with ye, stranger," he said. "Leastwise, not yit. We're arter the skunks which yanked the rafters out'n our sod houses!"

So that was why Riley and Miller were on the run. Elliott asked," who did that?"

"Mogul riders!" Wilkins bit out. "A whole mess of 'em. Early this mornin'. We was out chorin'."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No," Wilkins admitted. He added savagely, "'Twaren't their fault, though!"

"Rebuild your sod houses," Elliott advised. "The weather's good. It won't hurt your families to sleep out a few nights."

One of the two-bit cowmen shoved out a stubbled chin. "Who yuh think you are?" he demanded. "Givin' us orders! When they caved our roofs in it smashed stoves, bunks, everything! Me, I'm out for blood!"

"It's bad, yes," Elliott agreed. "But if you tangle with the ranchers it'll be worse. Sure, you'll kill some. They'll kill *all* of *you*."

"He talks sense," Jake put in.

"Sense—hell!" the stubbled cowman snarled. "It listens more like he's workin' for the Mogul Land and Cattle Company!"

"How about that, stranger?" Wilkins snapped.

Elliott stepped close to the big nester. "Look, Wilkins," he said, "Elliott's the name—Jim Elliott. Remember that. And remember this—I answer to no man!"

Wilkins' trigger hand slid up the barrel of his Winchester. From the tail of his eye, Elliott saw the stocky man's hands close over the butts of his two guns.

"Devil's Roost's full o' Mogul riders," Wilkins ground out. "We're after their scalps. We're a-startin' with Riley an' Miller. Where are they?"

"They're gone, Clem," Jake the barkeep asserted. "An' they was the only two that hit town."

Wilkins whirled on him. "Ye wouldn't lie, Jake!" he roared. "Was they all, shore 'nuff?"

"Shore 'nuff," Jake nodded.

Wilkins whirled again, this time toward the stocky man. "Blast ye, Gibbs!" he snorted. "*You* talked us into ridin' here. I knowed dang well the main gang'd hit fer the Santiagos. I bet they're a-settin up there on a mounting givin' us the hoss laugh!"

"I see Riley an' Miller hittin' for town," the man called Gibbs said. "I figgered they was follerin' the others."

"Reckon they was sent here to throw us off the trail," one of the nesters said bitterly.

Jim Elliott faced the stock man. "Guadalupe Gibbs," he murmured. "Didn't I see you coolin' in the Austin calaboose a few months back?"

Wilkins regarded Elliott, then Gibbs with critical eyes.

"Ye never told me that, Gibbs," the nester growled.

"Why he's a dad-blasted liar!" Gibbs declared. He stared searchingly at Elliott.

Elliott smiled. "That generally calls for something to follow, don't it?" His grey eyes narrowed down.

Apparently unable to figure this out, Gibbs scratched behind one ear.

"Hold it, you two!"

All eyes turned upon the barkeep. Jake was holding a sawed-off shotgun. "If you want fight, you'll have to go somewhere else for it," he said.

Elliott nodded. "Jake wants no shootin' in here," he told Gibbs.

He pulled a pencil stub and notebook from his shirt pocket. After writing, he savagely tore out the page, handed it to Gibbs.

"No man calls me a liar," he said. "Meet me there at dusk—alone. There'll be no one to bother us."

The crowd turned to their big leader for further orders.

"We'll hit fer the Santiagos," Wilkins decided.

"Don't do it," Elliott advised. "Between the Mogul and the other big outfits, they can muster two hundred gun-fighters. They'll wipe you out."

Wilkins socked his shaggy head to one side. "How come you know so much about this war, Elliott?" he inquired. He squinted one small blue eye.

"I know nothing," said Elliott.

"Yuh will," Wilkins snapped, "when every last range hawgin' cowman is daid! Yeah, an' mebby you'll be one of 'em. We can round up a couple hundred men, ourselves."

ELLIOTT knew he wasn't lying. He knew the preliminaries were over, with a few killings and some property damage. Now, both sides were ready to knuckle down.

"This here's a pore time fer a stranger to come here," Wilkins went on. He scratched his jaw, under a full, cinnamon-

colored beard. "'Specially when he's so danged tight-lipped about hisself."

He turned savagely. "C'mon, boys," he growled, heading for the batwings. "Keep yore eyes peeled. I still ain't shore the tow nain't full o' the warmints!"

Elliott watched them go. Jake promptly set two jiggers on the bar, filled them to the brim.

"The drinks are on the house, Elliott," he said.

Elliott walked to the bar. "Here's how," he said. The men clinked their glasses together, downed the khiskey in one swift gulp.

Jake filled the glasses again. "I was scared them two in the back might wake up before we get rid of 'em."

"So was I," Elliott said.

"I'm goin' to tell you somethin'." Jake picked up his glass. "Don't meet Gibbs. He's greased lightnin'."

"Fast, huh?" Elliott asked.

"But plenty," Jake told him. "In the two weeks he's been here, he's been showin' off plenty."

"No killin's," Elliott hazarded.

"The boys won't play with him. He's got 'em all scared."

Thoughtfully, Elliott toyed with his glass, a whimsical smile working about his mouth.

"What's your business—cattle buyer?" Jake asked. "Cattle shipper, mebby?"

"Nope."

"Lawman?" Jake suggested.

Elliott looked at him. "You don't see no badge, do you?" he said.

"I bet it's pinned to your vest linin'," Jake guessed.

Elliott laughed shortly. They drank.

"Adios, Jake," Elliott said. "Thanks for a pleasant afternoon."

At the batwings, he turned. "Do me a favor, will you?" he said. "If anybody asks—tell 'em I'm just a saddle-bum riding through."

"All right," Jake agreed. "You don't look the part, though."

Jim Elliott led his mare along the street until he reached Westbrook's General Store. The expressmen were now back on the job, rolling the big spools of barbed wire into the store. Elliott groundhitched the mare, entered.

Dave Westbrook stood just inside, seeing the job was done right. He saw Elliott.

"The ruckus never came to a head," he remarked.

"No," Elliott told him. "Wilkins is still lookin' for it, though."

Westbrook shook his head. "The fools are goin' at this the wrong way," he said. "It could be settled peaceable."

"Yeah," Elliott agreed. "Can we talk, now?"

"Make yourself at home in my office," Westbrook suggested. "You'll find it down that hallway in back. I'll be right with you, Elliott."

Elliott started for the rear of the store. As he walked into the narrow, darkened hallway, he wondered vaguely how Westbrook had learned his name.

And just then a bullet snarled past his ear to the accompaniment of sixgun thunder!

Crouching, Elliott cleared right holster. Boots sounded in the hallway. Then a slit of daylight showed at the back. Elliott lunged forward. A man slithered out the back door, and Elliott blasted at him on the run.

He jerked open the door, stepped out. For an all too brief instant, the sight of man and horse flashed before him. Both men blasted at the same time, and in the hurry both missed. The dry gulcher spurred out of sight. Elliott heard the horse sprint along the valley between the General Store and the saloon next door.

Cursing, he dashed back into the store. Dave Westbrook was flattened against the wall.

"What the devil—" Westbrook began.

Elliott ran past him, reached the front entrance as the expressmen were rolling in a spool of wire.

"Out of the way!" he yelled, and the men parted.

He jumped over the spool and out to the street. The drygulcher was booting south. Elliott emptied the gun in hand, started for the other gun. He shrugged.

The street was cleared. But curious eyes peeped from hastily found hiding places. Elliott went back into the store. Westbrook stepped away from the wall.

"Who was that?" Elliott demanded.

"I'm not sure," Westbrook declared. "Some jigger was just in to buy some

spurs. It might've been him, but I thought he'd gone."

ELLIOTT broke the gun he'd just used. "It was that two-bit cowman with Wilkins, the one that was always stickin' that stubbled chin out," he said, half to himself. He emptied the cartridge cases into a waste box. "What's his name?" he asked, while sliding fresh bullets into the chambers.

"I don't know half the people around here," Westbrook shrugged. "I just bought this store a few months ago."

"You learned my name mighty sudden-like," Elliott said.

"It's a small town," Westbrook said calmly. "Things get around. Well, what do you want to talk about?"

"A job," Elliott said.

Westbrook shook his head. "Already got a clerk, and a delivery man. Sorry, but I'm filled up."

"That's all I wanted," Elliott said. "Much obliged, anyhow." He walked out.

At dusk, Elliott was five miles east of Devil's Roost. He headed the mare into a gloomy canyon in the lower Santiagos. Long, sultry shadows lent an eerie aspect to the surroundings.

He reined in. Fresh hoofprints showed on a sandy spot ahead. He knew Guadalupe Gibbs was waiting for him.

A little snake slithered away through the dry grass. The mare snorted, reared. Elliott held a tight rein, soothed her, quieted her. From the distance a coyote yapped. A wolf howled from somewhere in the canyon. Elliott urged the mare on. He rounded a bend. And then beside a boulder known as Scalp Hunter's Rock he saw a lone horseman waiting.

"Hi, Jim, you dirty ol' sunuva stinkin' hoss-thief!" the rider greeted.

"Hi, Guadalupe, you little sawed-off, bowlegged warthog!" Jim Elliott answered.

Guadalupe Gibbs rode out to meet him. Their hands met in a firm clasp.

Until a few months ago, Elliott had been a range detective in the employ of a big Chicago agency. He had covered a vast territory ranging from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Pacific Coast to the Mississippi River. After successfully getting to the bottom of several important cases, he decided to stake his reputation on an agency of his own. He opened headquarters at Austin.

Guadalupe Gibbs had also sleuthed for the Chicago concern. Elliott had worked with Guadalupe on several cases. He knew Gibbs for a man of keen head, and razor-sharp on his Colt Savvy. Elliott proposed that Guadalupe throw in with him on his new venture. They turned in their resignations at the same time.

Meanwhile, the eyes of certain holding companies in the civilized Northland had been gazing out over the Great Plains. They saw the millions of wild Texas longhorns that would become property of the man who burned his mark on them. They saw the vast rangelands with their natural forage and waterholes which could practically be had for the asking.

The great cattle drives began over the Chisholm Trail northward into Kansas. The longhorn's days lasted for nearly ten more years before he began to peter out. And barbed wire had been invented. The open range and the longhorn began their death struggle together.

Texas' population was constantly increasing. Settlers from the deep South, the Middle-west, and the North were moving in. These families usually had, or rounded up, a little herd of beef stock. The waterholes were open to them. Since the rangeland was practically in their vast acreages.

The invention of barbed wire, however, changed the picture overnight. At last it was possible for the big cattlemen to breed pure improved stock. With part of their riches the longhorn brought them, they imported prize stock from Europe and the British Isles—durhams and herefords for beef, holstein-friesians and jerseys for dairy cattle.

THE Mogul Land and Cattle outfit was operated by one of the Northern holding companies. When the Mogul's ledger showed far too much money being spent for barbed wire, the company telegraphed the superintendent for an explanation. It was learned that bloody range wars had broken out through the cattle country. Bands, armed with guns and wire-cutters, rode by night tearing fences down as fast as it could be built. There had been much killing.

The Mogul owners were interested only

in their own expenses. They contacted Jim Elliott, advised him to set his own fee if successful, and left the matter in his hands—but they stipulated a time limit of one month.

"Knock the moths out of your old Stetson, Guadalupe," Elliott had told Gibbs, in the Austin office. "Hustle into your Levis, buckle on your Colts, an' ride west. Mister, we're about to commence on our first big case." He handed the letter to Gibbs.

Guadalupe read, whistled.

"You know the country over there?" Elliott asked.

"Yeah," Gibbs nodded. "Used to run a few steers across from Chihuahua when I rode for Shanghai Pierce. It was wild country in the old days."

"Looks like it's a sight wilder, now," Elliott said.

"Thought you was never goin' to show up, Jim," Gibbs said.

"I figgered it wouldn't look good—us arrivin' too close together," Elliott told him. "Besides, I wound up a few things in Austin. Telegraphed north to let no one know we was comin'—not even the Mogul super. I learned his name's Bob Manger."

He built a cigarette. "Well, what've you learned, Guadalupe?"

"Not too much," Gibbs admitted. "I know everybody's goin' around with a chip on their shoulder." He took the makin's as Elliott passed them to him, rolled himself a smoke. Elliott struck a match, lit them up.

"It's the fool plowmen an' small ranchers ag'in the big outfits," Gibbs went on. "It don't look good."

Elliott exhaled a stream of smoke. "How come you threw in with them nesters?" he asked.

Gibbs laughed shortly. "First day I hit Devil's Roost," he related, "I got in a little drinkin' bout with a feller named Mike Ross. He was with Wilkins today—that proddy jigger with the stubbled beard."

"Your pal Mike Ross," Elliott informed him, "took a couple pot shots at me today."

"What for?" Gibbs wondered.

"I dunno," Elliott said. "Thought mebby you could tell me."

"No can do," said Gibbs. "Did they bury him yet?"

Elliott laughed. "I didn't kill him. I'd like a little pow-wow with him, though. Well, go on."

"Some cowpoke off the Mogul roared in ridin' for war," Gibbs continued. "He chose me, an' I laid him cold. Ross liked the way I handled my guns. He invited me out to his shack. Next day I met Wilkins an' the others. They sort of adopted me.

"'Pears the main beef's over waterholes, Jim. These big boys got 'em all fenced in. The two-bitters started out by cuttin' enough wire to let their stock through. The cowboys come back with tramplin' through the nester's fields. That got things poppin' good."

Elliott dragged on his quirly, crunched it out on the ground. "What do you know about this Dave Westbrook?" he asked.

"The feller that owns the General Store?" Gibbs said. "What's he got to do with this war?" He paused, cigarette halfway to his lips.

"Yeah," he said slowly, "just what *has* he got to do with it . . ."

Both men were silent for a moment.

Then Elliott said, "I been scoutin' around fairly close the last few days. I learned Westbrook owns no land an' no stock. So I figgered he'd have an unbiased slant on this thing. Reckon I came near makin' the mistake of tellin' him who I was. But when your pal Ross tried to kill me in Westbrook's store I sure changed my mind quick!"

Gibbs ground his smoke out with the heel of his boot. "The more barbed wire that's cut," he said thoughtfully, "the more dinero goes into Westbrook's till."

Elliott laid a hand on Gibbs' sleeve. "Don't burn too much on that," he warned. "It's only an idea. But if we're right, Westbrook ain't workin' this alone. Guadalupe, if we can dope this out an' settle it, do you know what it means?"

"Sure," said Gibbs. "It means we got a fat bankroll, an' a big rep."

"More than that," Elliott told him. "It means we can bring an end to all the other fence wars in the cattle country."

"Yeah," Gibbs agreed, then said, "Say, Jim, what made you tell them nesters I'm a jailbird? Why—"

Suddenly he whispered, "Look out, Jim —above us!"

He lowered slowly to his haunches, then laid on his back. And all the time he was dragging his gun from right hip-holster.

Elliott glanced up, grasping his own guns. Amid a thunderous roaring dirt started kicking up around them, close!

Overhead, a broad-brimmed hat was outlined on Scalp Hunter's Rock. Gibbs blasted once. The hat disappeared, and the man under it screamed. They heard him tumble down the other side.

"C'mon!" Elliott said. Both men scrambled to their feet. "Keep your guns peeled —mebby he's still alive."

HE walked around one side of the rock, Gibbs around the other. They met at the figure of the bushwhacker who lay face down on the gravel.

Elliott rolled him over. "It's Del Miller," he said. "A Mogul rider. I smacked a gun barrel over his dome in the Cowhorn today."

Gibbs looked down at Miller's face. "He's shore a glutton for gun barrels," Gibbs said. "He's the jigger I laid cold the first day I was here!"

But Del Miller seemed a tough man to kill. Gibbs' slug had grazed one side of his neck, merely stunning him.

"He must've followed me here," Elliott decided. "Beat it, Guadalupe, before he comes to. I'm just hopin' he couldn't see who you were. When the nesters ask what happened when we met, tell 'em I got scared an' didn't show. Adios!"

"What you goin' to do with him?" Gibbs asked.

"Rope him to his saddle, an' take him to the Mogul," Elliott said. "Then I'm goin' to have a long talk with Superintendent Bob Manger."

After Gibbs had gone, Elliott found Miller's bronc tied to a mesquite several yards back. It was quite a job loading the cowboy on. At last he was on his way.

The Mogul Land and Cattle Company covered a broad area, and its ranch buildings lay along San Francisco Creek, about fifteen miles north of Devil's Roost. It was late when Elliott arrived.

A lamp was burning in the bunkhouse. Elliott rode there, leading Miller's horse. Miller had come to a long way back. He'd been cursing Elliott, cursing his sore neck, cursing everything in general. Elliott had paid no attention.

He opened the bunkhouse door. Inside, four men were playing poker. Others were asleep.

Elliott said, "One of your pards is spillin' blood. You better go look after him."

Three of the men laid down their cards, went outside. The other player walked to Elliott.

"What happened?" he asked.

"A little gun trouble," Elliott told him. "Where do I find Bob Manger?"

"He's in bed," the man said. "You lookin' for a job?"

Elliott decided he'd better say, "Yes."

"I do most the hirin'," he was told. "Name's Cliff Woodhouse, the foreman. What's your qualifications?"

"Well, I rode for Goodnight-Loving an' a heap others back in the old days," said Elliott. "I know cattle."

Cliff Woodhouse chuckled. "To hell with cattle," he said. "What I want is what do you know about them guns you're packin'?"

Elliott looked the foreman over. He was a bulky fellow with big black mustache, not unpleasant looking.

"What does your boy Miller know about guns?" Elliott inquired.

"Plenty," Woodhouse said.

Elliott pulled Miller's gun from his waistband, laid it on the table. "But not quite enough," he said.

Woodhouse grinned. "Mister," he said, "you're hired!"

ELLIOTT was surprised next morning when Bob Manger sent word to meet him in the superintendent's office. For some reason, Elliott had expected to find Manger a little man. But he was nearly as big as Clem Wilkins. He wore a gray tweed suit, was clean-shaven. About forty, Elliott guessed.

Manger rose from behind his desk when Elliott entered. "Glad you finally showed up," the super smiled, and put out his hand.

Elliott shook with him. He didn't say anything at first. Then, "You were expecting me?" he asked cautiously.

Manger chuckled. "Have a chair, El-

liott," he invited. "You can lay your cards on the table with me. You see, I'm the man who asked for you on this case. I know your reputation. Have a cigar."

Elliott selected one from the box. Manger took one, struck a match and lit them up.

"In a way, Manger," Elliott said, "I'm glad you do know who I am. I haven't exactly been idle the last few days. I know the fool plowmen's side of this picture. I'm not sure but what they're right. Now, let's have your side of it. Make it good. Every man in the country is under suspicion in my book—you included. Let's have it."

Manger dragged on his cigar. "Every man should be under suspicion," he agreed, and smiled. "Even me.

"Well, here it is," he continued. "When barbed wire first arrived here we strung fence all around Mogul property. That took in most of the San Francisco, and about a dozen sweet waterholes. At the same time, the other big outfits were stringing fence. I guess we had all the water barred off before we knew it.

"I heard Wilkins and that crowd were plenty sore. I knew they'd cut a little wire to let their stock through. I didn't blame them. I got together with some fellows with the other spreads. We decided to ride over and tell Wilkins we'd leave part of the San Francisco open for the farmers.

"Wilkins looked like he wanted to talk. But there was a fellow there named Mike Ross. Ross called us every vile name he could think of. That got the others all fired up. None of us had a gun. They drove us off with rifles.

"We took a vote and decided they could go to hell. If it's war they wanted, we'd give it to them. That night, they tore down miles of wire, fence-posts and all. We learned later that they used the posts for rafters in their sod houses.

"Most of our boys are young, and pretty wild. They were anxious to get the rust out of their guns. They've been doing it. They've done a lot of things I haven't ordered them to do.

"Well, that's it," Manger finished. "What have you got to say, Elliott?"

Elliott stood. "Thanks for the cigar," he said. He tossed what was left of it in the spitoon, and went out.

He was walking toward the stable when he ran smack into Bat Riley. Riley had an ugly gash over his left ear, the result of getting banged with Jake's whiskey bottle.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" he snarled at Elliott.

"I'm workin' with you," Elliott grinned.

"Yeah," Riley said, "an' you damn near killed Del last night. You ain't gittin' away with that."

"Look, Riley," Elliott said. "I dont want any more gunplay with you boys. But if you'll toss your gun away, I'll do the same and knock some of that cockiness out of you with fists."

"What's the matter?" Riley snapped. "Afraid to use your guns?"

"No," Elliott said softly. "I'm just afraid I'd kill you. I don't want to do that—not yet. There's a question I want to ask you first."

"Ask it," Riley said.

"All right," said Elliott. "How much is Dave Westbrook payin' you an' Miller to keep this fence war goin'?"

The men were standing about two yards apart. Suddenly Bat Riley rushed forward. His fist began a crashing blow toward Elliott's jaw. Elliott blocked it with left arm. He sent his right fist up under Riley's chin. Riley's boots left the ground. The cowpoke piled up flat on his broad back.

Abruptly, Elliott turned his back, and went on to the stable. He grabbed his saddle off the sawhorse where he'd left it last night and tossed it on the mare. As he rode out of the barn he saw a horseman coming in through the Mogul gate. It was Dave Westbrook.

Elliott wheeled the mare, booted her along in back of the buildings. He dismounted behind the superintendent's office, went in through the back door.

Bob Manger turned in his swivel chair when he heard the door open. "Back kind of soon, Elliott," he remarked.

"Yeah," Elliott said. He walked to the desk. "Dave Westbrook's ridin' in. What's he doin' out here?"

"Westbrook?" Manger said. "Good. I have to place another order for barbed wire."

ELLIOTT sat on one corner of the desk. "When Westbrook comes in," he said, "tell him you're not buyin' any

wire today. Tell him you're leavin' the fence down."

Manger rose, stared at Elliott. "Why, man, that's crazy," the super said. "We've got stock out there that's worth fortunes. They'll wander."

"That heavy stuff won't go far," Elliott opined. "They're well fed an' well watered. They'll stick to the waterholes."

"Yes, and suppose those nesters start driving their longhorns in to mix with them?" Manger complained. "That means our job has gone to the devil."

Elliott said, "I hope to have this thing wound up by sundown. You've got to help a little, Manger."

"All right," Manger agreed. "I'll give you 'til sundown. If you don't get things cleared up by then, we start building fence."

Elliott went out the back door as Dave Westbrook came in through the front.

"Mornin', Bob," Westbrook greeted. "I heard tell the nesters tore down a lot of fence last night. How much wire'll you need this time?"

Elliott waited at the back door. He'd left it open a scant inch. He heard Manger say, "None."

Softly, Elliott closed the door. He climbed to the saddle, rode on. Bat Riley was just coming to when he rode past the stable. Riley stumbled toward the bunkhouse, tenderly rubbing his chin.

It was nearing noon when Elliot pulled up before Wilkins' sod house. Wilkins almost had a new roof completed. Mike Ross was helping him. So was Guadalupe Gibbs.

Wilkins was unarmed. Gibbs had evidently removed his guns for convenience while working on the roof. But Mike Ross was working with his gun belted on.

Ross was the first man to see Elliott ride in. He went for his gun. He never drew. He found himself staring into the bore of one of Elliott's .45's.

"C'mon down, boys," Elliott ordered. "We got a little palaverin' to do."

One by one they jumped to the ground. Wilkins said, "If ye've come to finish your fight with Gibbs, go somewhere else. They's women an' kids workin' in the fields."

Elliott dismounted. "Guadalupe," he said, "it's high time we got to work. First

off, kindly relieve Mr. Ross of his gun."

Gibbs grinned, "Howdy, Jim," and did as he was told.

"What is this?" Wilkins demanded. "Do you two—"

"Yeah," Gibbs said, "we've knowed each other for quite a spell."

"Wilkins," Elliott said, "you've been listening to a pack of lies. Now you're goin' to hear some truth. An' neighbor Ross is goin' to tell it!

"Ross," he went on, "Why'd you try to kill me yesterday?"

"I dunno what you're talkin' about," Ross growled.

Quietly, Elliott unbelted his guns, handed them to Gibbs. "Just see that Wilkins don't interfere, Guadalupe," he said.

"Look out for him, Jim," Gibbs warned. "He's a tough one."

Elliott walked to Ross. Ross had fisted his big hands. He was ready. With surprising speed, Ross uncoiled one that sent Elliott staggering.

Elliott came in again, this time more

cautiously. Grinning, Ross again beat him to the punch. Elliott piled up on the grass. He raised his head, shook blood from his nose and mouth. Ross moved toward him. He pulled back one booted foot, aimed a kick at Elliott's ribs. Elliott rolled out of the way.

The boot grazed him. Then Elliott grasped Ross's heel, and gave a quick upward wrench. Ross sat down with a grunt. Elliott got to his feet.

He waited. Cursing, Ross rose. He rushed in. This time, Elliott's fist connected squarely with his chin. Ross staggered back. Elliott followed closely, banging blows into the other's face. Finally, Ross went down.

But he wasn't out. Elliott grabbed Ross's shirt front, dragged him to his feet. He hammered one that landed with a reverberating smack. Ross was out, now.

Elliott found a bucket of water hanging on a tree limb near Wilkins' house. He splashed the contents over Ross's face. Pretty soon the man came to, sputtering.

With very little more persuasion, he was ready to answer Elliott's questions, now. Gibbs and Wilkins moved closer, so they could hear.

The day before, after the Wilkins crowd had left the Cowhorn Saloon, Ross went to see Westbrook. He told Westbrook about Elliott trying to break up the war. That in itself was enough for Westbrook to want Elliott out of the way. Besides he figured Elliott for just what he was—a range detective.

When Westbrook saw Elliott coming, he told Ross to hide in the hallway, and shoot to kill.

"Looks like you was right about Westbrook, Jim," Gibbs said.

Elliott took his guns, buckled them on. "Just what sort of deal you been gettin' out of this?" he asked Ross.

"A commission on all the barbed wire Westbrook sells," Ross said. "The longhorn market went to hell. I had to make a livin' some way."

"Yuh could've turned to farmin'," Wilkins snapped.

"Tell me, Wilkins," Elliott said. "Did you boys go to the Santiagos yesterday?"

"No," said Wilkins. "When Ross an' Gibbs left, we figgered our two best gunhands was gone. We come home."

"You know," Elliott told him, "you'd have saved a lot of trouble by listening to Manger and the others. They came to tell you they'd leave enough water open for you. You drove 'em off."

"That was Ross's idee," Wilkins asserted. "An all the wire cuttin' was, too. I wanted to talk to 'em."

He peered searchingly at Elliott. "Kin yuh git Manger to leave it open—now?"

Elliott nodded. "I'm sure of it," he said. "Tell the other farmers the war's over."

"No it ain't!" Wilkins snarled. "Not yit!"

HE jerked Mike Ross to his feet. "You dirty skunk!" he said between his teeth, and sent a fist crashing into Ross's face. Ross groaned, went down, and lay still.

"Now," Wilkins grinned, dusting off his hands, "far as *this* farmer's concerned—the war's over!"

But it wasn't over for Elliott and Gibbs, and they knew it.

"What you figger to do about Westbrook?" Gibbs asked a few minutes later. They were riding back to the Mogul.

"Take him to the nearest ranger station," Elliott replied, "turn him over, an' appear as witness against him."

Gibbs nodded. "How about that jigger Del Miller?" he said. "I figger he's in with Westbrook, same as Ross."

"I did," Elliott said. "But not any more."

"He's been keepin' the cowboys all stirred up," Gibbs reminded him.

"I know," Elliott agreed. "But I think Miller an' his pard Riley are just a couple of wild youngsters. Westbrook's too hungry for dinero to get too many boys on his payroll. I think he figured the cowboys'd stay plenty hot, anyhow."

"I dunno," Gibbs said doubtfully.

"We'll see," said Elliott.

Back in Manger's office, Elliott introduced Gibbs and told Manger what had happened at Clem Wilkins' place. The super was surprised to learn that Dave Westbrook had been fanning the coals to keep the fence war hot.

"He'll never get any more business from the Mogul," Manger stated. "We'll order from some other town."

"Westbrook won't be gettin' any business from anybody," Elliott told him. "He's due to spend a few years as guest of the state of Texas."

Manger promised that now Wilkins was cooled off he'd get together with him and arrange for the nesters to get their share of waterholes. I'll get in a good report for you to the home office," Manger also promised.

"Better wait 'til after we nail Westbrook," Elliott advised, "Meanwhile, see if you can get Miller an' Riley in here. Some of your boys need a little coolin' off, too."

The two cowpokes weren't hard to find. Manger returned with them in a few minutes. The minute they saw Elliott and Gibbs, Miller yelled:

"There they are, Bat—look out! That Gibbs been gunnin' fer the nesters. The other one's his pard. Don't trust 'em, Bob!"

"Better put 'em straight, Manger," Elliott said.

And Manger did—in a hurry. At first the cowpokes were dumbfounded. Pretty soon they started grinning sheepishly.

"I'm powerful sorry," Miller said, "if we caused yuh any trouble."

"So'm I," Riley agreed.

Elliot laughed good naturedly. "You boys caused plenty trouble, all right—but on lookin' you over I'd say it was mostly to yourselves!"

It was almost time for the General Store to close for the day when Elliott and Gibbs rode into Devil's Roost.

"We should've roped that Mike Ross an' brought him in," Gibbs said. "He's liable to make trouble yet."

"Could be you're right," Elliott admitted. "But I'm willin' to give Ross a chance. I'm hopin' he'll stick to his land an' be a good dog. If so, he'lll make a fine witness against Westbrook."

"He tried to kill you, don't forget that," said Gibbs.

"At Westbrook's orders," Elliott reminded him.

They dismounted before the General Store. As they started up the plank steps, the last lamp from inside was doused. But there was still enough daylight to see dimly. They started to enter.

Just then a sixgun thundered from inside, and Elliott felt pain sting his left shoulder.

He and Gibbs crouched, pulled guns. They pushed inside, their guns roaring. Two others roared back at them. Dave Westbrook was fanning one. And Mike Ross was there.

"I said we should've brought him in!" Gibbs yelled during the blasting.

And suddenly the blasting stopped. Dave Westbrook and Mike Ross were down. Elliott and Gibbs gazed at them through the density of powdersmoke.

"Ross must've rode in to warn Westbrook," Gibbs growled. "They figgered they could pick us off as we walked in. Them fellers sure need a heap of target practice."

"It wouldn't help them now," Elliott said.

He looked at the barbed wire spools stacked at the rear of the store. "This is the beginning, Guadalupe," he said. "From now on, folks are goin' to learn to use that stuff right."

Elliott's scratched shoulder gave him but little trouble that night. Next morning he and Gibbs were riding toward the nearest stagecoach line to take them back to Austin.

"Once again, Jim," Gibbs said, "why'd you tell them nesters I'm a jailbird?"

Elliott laughed. "First off," he said, "I didn't want 'em to get any fancy ideas about us workin' together—until we held our pow-wow. Second, you was in jail. How about that time I bailed you out for gettin' drunk?"

"Yeah," Gibbs grunted. "I forgot about that."

"An' you forgot to pay me back the twenty-five bucks bail money," Elliott said. "Oh, well, I'll just hold it out of your bonus for windin' up this barbed wire war."

THE RUSTY BADGE

By BEN FRANK

The big, wide-shouldered Marshal had once been able to whip any hombre in Salt Lick—with fists or guns. But that was before Trig Tapy's lead burned his courage to ashes.

LUKE AUSTIN lay staring up into the dark, feeling a fine cold sweat dampening his aching body. He thought it must be late, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure about anything except his fear. He wasn't even sure whether or not he'd been asleep. That's the way it was lately, with his jumbled thoughts always going back to the roaring of six-guns, the solid thud of bullets blasting through his body.

He groped for the bottle on the chair beside the bed. It was empty.

Cursing heavily, he slid his long, wasted legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. Pain streaked from his healing wounds. With shaking hands, he found a match and lit the lamp. In the back of his hazy thinking, he seemed to remember that there was a bottle of whiskey stuck away in the cupboard.

His reflection in the mirror held him a moment. Hollow, blood-shot eyes stared back at him out of a haggard, whiskery face under uncut black hair. A big man with a wide sweep of shoulders, Luke Austin had once been able to whip any man in Salt Lick with fists or guns. But that was before Trig Tapy's lead had burned his courage to ashes.

"So you was once the Marshal of Salt Lick," he said hoarsely to his reflection.

He laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. It echoed in the room and came back to his ears, harsh and unfunny. He shivered, and his body cried out for a drink.

Lamp in hand, he tottered into the front room. It was a room without a woman's touch, for his wife had been dead six years. Jimmy had been five when she'd died. And thinking of his son, the man turned toward the button's door.

The door stood ajar. The kid, he thought, would be asleep. The kid who thought his dad was the greatest man alive.

Luke laughed again, this time silently. Jimmy didn't know that his old man had lost his nerve. He thought Luke was merely resting up from the bullet wounds, that soon the man would be back on the job, packing his twin Colts. But someday, Luke knew, the button would wake up to the fact that his old man was washed-up, finished. Luke shuddered. He needed that drink.

As he went by the kid's door, he glanced in. At first, he thought his eyes were playing him false, but a second look sent a shock of panic through him. The kid's bed stood empty.

Jimmy wasn't the kind who'd go wandering about at night. Not Jimmy Austin. The kid had a horror of darkness, a fear that seemed inborn. It was the kind of a fear that Luke had never been able to drive or coax out of the boy.

The man went back into the front room and stared about. There wasn't much to see—the dull furniture, a few pictures of Kate and Jimmy when he was a baby. He went into the kitchen and called the button's name twice before he noticed that the door stood open. He knew then that Jimmy had gone outside, and real fear took hold of him. It drove the whiskey haze completely out of his brain.

Something, he knew, would have to be terribly wrong to make Jimmy go out into the darkness. Maybe, he thought, someone had kidnapped the boy. Some old enemy who'd heard that Luke Austin, the famous Marshall of Salt Lick, had lost his nerve. Luke had many enemies among the lawless.

A sound jerked him toward the open door, and he saw Jimmy walk in, blinking his blue eyes at the light. A gasp of relief hissed from between Luke's gray lips. The button was alive. He was all right, even if his skin did seem a little

white under the freckles, and his sandy hair, which he'd gotten from Kate, fairly stood on end.

"Jimmy," Luke asked, "what's wrong? Where've you been?"

"No place, Pop," the kid answered. "Nothin's wrong."

Luke's relief turned to quick anger. The kid was hiding something. He caught the boy by his skinny shoulder and gave him a rough shake.

"Out with it, boy!" he barked. "What've you been doin'?"

"I went for a walk. Just a little walk—"

"Don't lie to me!" Luke cut in. "You wouldn't go for a walk at night. You're scared of the dark."

"That's just it," the kid said, his spunk someway he knew it wouldn't.

And for some reason, he felt a tightness grip his chest. A tightness that seemed to squeeze his heart and lungs into a burning knot.

Jimmy scratched at his turned-up nose, and said, "One day at school, my teacher told us no matter what we was afraid of, we could get over it if we'd try hard enough. I got to thinkin' how I was afraid of the dark. Then I thought what was the thing I would be scared most to do after dark. An' I knew right off what it was."

"What?" Luke asked.

"Go walk around the ol' mill on Salt Creek. Then I said to myself, if I could do that, I wouldn't be scared of nothin'

suddenly coming to the surface. "I'm scared of the dark, an' want to get over it. I wanta be like you, and I can't be like you if I'm scared of anything."

Luke let go of the kid's shoulder. He wanted to scream, "You don't want to be like me! I'm the biggest damn' coward in the world."

He said, "Tell me about this business, Jimmy."

Jimmy's face picked up some color. He ran a small hand through his stand-uppish red hair and grinned in embarrassment. "Maybe it'll sound funny to you, Pop," he said. "I'd a-told you before, but I kinda wanted to surprise you."

"It won't sound funny," Luke said, and again. I would be brave like you. Maybe someday I could be a marshall."

The button's voice stumbled on, while Luke stood there, feeling the sweat oozing out of his skin and the tightness in his chest became a pain sharper than anything he'd felt from Trig Tapy's lead.

Jimmy had figured things out in his own way. The first night, he'd just stood on the porch, looking into the darkness and telling himself there was nothing to fear. The second night, he'd gone as far as the front gate. The third night, he'd walked past the barn and out to the road. This night, he'd gone as far as the crossroad. Every night he intended to go a little nearer the old mill until at last he screwed up courage to go right up to it.

"I ain't half as scared as I was that first night," he finished. "Gosh, Pop, maybe I won't be scared at all sometime."

The man didn't say anything. There was too much whirl in his mind for talking.

"Pop," Jimmy asked anxiously, "you don't care if I keep on goin' out at night, do you?"

Luke found his voice. "You keep right on, son.'

He picked up the lamp, but set it down quickly. His hands were shaking too much to risk carrying it.

The boy started for his room, stopped and said, "Pop, some of the kids at school said that you was washed-up. Afraid of your own shadow. I made 'em shut up. I told 'em as soon as you was well, you'd go after Trig Tapy. You will, won't you, Pop?"

The kid's words were like a blow. The man didn't answer.

Jimmy's eyes widened. "Pop, you ain't scared, are you?"

"Get to bed!" Luke rasped.

"Pop—"

"Hell, no!" the man yelled. "I ain't washed-up!"

The kid dodged into his room, and Luke took the lamp and stumbled into his own room. He shut the door and stared at himself in the mirror. He hated what he saw—the ashy face, the bleary eyes, the trembling lips. And he'd lied to his kid!

He slumped on the bed, thinking back. For months before he'd met Trig Tapy, he'd felt himself losing his nerve. Ever since he'd had a run in with a gunman by the name of Kid Farrow, a cold fear had been gnawing at his heart. He'd gotten Farrow, but it had been close. Farrow had almost beaten him to the draw. That had scared him. He'd gone out of town and had practiced with his guns. The old speed seemed to be there, but he was still scared. It was then that he realized he'd lost his nerve, and a marshall without plenty of nerve was no good in a rail-end boom-town like Salt Lick.

Then Wes Clapper had brought Trig Tapy to town. Clapper ran the Last Chance Saloon and he needed such a man as Tapy to help him fleece the trail-herd boys and to keep them from coming back with guns blazing. Tapy could do that. He was good with both cards and sixes. He was so good that Luke Austin had to run him out of town. Only Tapy didn't run.

THE two men met on a bright afternoon in front of the Last Chance, and something had gone to smash inside the marshall. He'd flung his lead into thin air, while Trig Tapy had knocked him down with his first blast. Then the little gunman had put another bullet into Luke's left side for good measure.

A few days later, Mayor Tom Rohn had come to see Luke. Worry filled the man's big red face.

"Luke," he asked, "how long do yuh reckon it'll be 'fore yuh can get back on the job?"

"I don't know," Luke answered weakly. "Why?"

"Trig Tapy and Wes Clapper 're gettin' mighty high-handed. Some of us figure the Last Chance'll have to be closed up, Luke. There's been some hold-ups lately, too. We need yuh back on the job, Luke."

Fingers of cold fear slid up and down Luke Austin's spine, while the wounds in his body burned like high flames. He fumbled for his shirt on a near-by chair and unpinned his badge.

"You'll have to get someone else, Tom," he said flatly. "My old speed's gone."

"Nonsense!" the mayor said. "Yo'll be as good as new."

Tom Rohn, Luke knew, didn't know what it was to have hot lead pound into his body. He didn't understand how it was when a man completely lost his nerve.

Anger flared up in Luke. He flung the badge at the fat man.

"Get out!" he screeched. "Let me alone! An' take your damn' badge with you!"

Tom Rohn had gone, looking confused and a little angry. But he hadn't understood, Luke knew. Nobody could understand who hadn't been through the mill. Luke had dropped back on his pillow, his face as white as the sheet.

Since recovering enough to get around, he'd refused to see anyone or go anyplace. He was no good for anything except feeling fear and trying to blot out his thinking with whiskey.

But now Jimmy had put a fuzzy idea into his head. He sat up a little straighter and thought that maybe the kid was right. Maybe a boy or a man could overcome fear if he went at it in the right way.

Anyway, it might be worth trying. And

he'd do it like Jimmy was doing it— a little at a time. First, he'd stop the drinking. He'd start riding his horse a little every day. He'd walk around the block and meet people and look them in the eyes. Then he'd ride to the country along with his six-guns and shoot until the roar didn't make him wince, or the smell of powder smoke didn't make him sick. Later, he'd walk up the street, packing his guns. Maybe he'd ask for his badge back. And by that time, maybe he'd be ready to meet Trig Tapy again.

The next day, he rode his horse down to Salt Creek. The ride made him sick. It brought back the pain to his wounds and exhausted him.

He tried it again the following day, and found it easier. Later that same day, he walked around the block and met some people. He looked them in the eyes and tried to ignore the look of pity he saw on their faces.

Each night he checked with Jimmy.

"How you gettin' along with your walks?" he'd ask.

Sometimes the button would grin and say, "Swell, Pop."

Other times he'd twist at his reddish hair and not look his Pop in the eyes. "I felt scared last night," he'd say. "Somethin' made a noise—but I didn't run. I walked all the way home. But I was scared."

One morning, Luke got up feeling better than usual. He strapped his twin Colts on, feeling a ripple of cold slide over him. This was the first time he'd touched the big .45's since that day he'd met Trig Tapy. He fought down his rising fear and cursed the clammy sweat that came to his face.

That day, he fired the big sixes until the barrels turned hot. All the time, his eyes kept blurring and his hands shook, sending the lead away from the target. He almost gave up in hopeless disgust—and then his hand steadied, and three of five slugs found the bull's eye.

He went home in the early dusk, his spirits soaring. That same night, Jimmy walked clear to the edge of Salt Creek and back.

"Pop," the button cried, "I wasn't scared hardly at all! Why, even when a rabbit ran outta some weeds, I didn't hardly jump. Gosh, Pop, some of these nights I'm gonna walk right up to that ol' mill—an' go right in!"

Standing there, listening to the kid, he reached a decision. Tomorrow he'd walk by the Last Chance and look at the spot where he'd stood and fallen with Tapy's lead smacking into him. He'd make himself look at that spot until he stopped trembling—even if he had to stand in front of the Last Chance all day.

THE morning found him tired and his resolve shaken. After the kid had gone to school, Luke wandered out to the barn and fed his horse. He went back to the house and made a pretense of cleaning things up. He'd walk to the Last Chance right after dinner, he promised himself, while fear kept building up in him.

He doubled his big fists and stared at them. They looked soft. They were no good. He was no good. He stumbled to the cupboard and searched for the bottle of whiskey. He found it, but didn't take a drink, for Jimmy's footsteps pounded across the porch. He shoved the bottle hastily back and turned from the cupboard just as the kid burst into the room.

The boy's hair hung in his eyes. A red cut flamed on one cheek, and his shirt was half torn from his thin shoulders.

"Some of the kids said you was yellow," the boy sobbed. "I licked all three of 'em. I made 'em eat their words. Pop, you ain't yellow, are you? As soon as you're well, you're gonna wear your badge? You're—"

"Sure, son," Luke said through tight lips. "Here, I'll wash your face. Look, boy, don't you pay no attention to what anybody says."

After the boy had gone back to school, Luke began to buckle on his Colts. His fingers were all thumbs and wet with a clammy sweat. Some way he got the buckles fastened.

Outside it was sunny and birds sang in the cottonwood by the well. He shoved the screen door wide and stumbled across the porch. His feet refused to go beyond the shade of the cottonwood.

"You're not ready to walk past the Last Chance, packin' guns, Luke Austin," he whispered hoarsely. "You can't do it. Maybe you could go there without your guns, but you ain't got the guts to run a chance

of meetin' Trig Tapy with your guns. You're still yellow!"

He stumbled back into the house and threw his guns on the bed. Outside, he stopped at the well and splashed cold water over his face. The sun beat hot against his back. He stumbled down the street blindly, feeling the jar of his boots against the hard ground, cursing the sharp rapid thump of his heart against his ribs.

"Hello, Luke," a voice said.

He lifted his eyes. Tom Rohn, the mayor, stood in the door of his hardware store.

"Howdy, Tom," he heard himself say.

"Yo're lookin' better," Tom said in a friendly voice. He stepped out to meet Luke. "Yore badge's waitin' for yuh, feller, as soon as yuh want it."

Luke didn't meet the big man's eyes. "I ain't never goin' to want it, Tom," he said tonelessly. "You'll have to find somebody else."

The mayor caught Luke by the arm. "That ain't no way to talk," he said. "Listen, Luke. Day 'fore yesterday, the stage was held up at Ridge Pole Pass. They was carryin' the Barton Mine payroll. A week ago, ol' man Axel sold some cattle. 'Fore he got out of town, somebody had bashed him over the head an' robbed him. Things like that have got to be stopped, Luke. An' yo're the man to do it."

"Let me alone," he husked. "I'm through. Hear me?" His voice rose. "I don't care what happens—I ain't havin' no part in any of it!"

He stumbled on down the street.

With a sickening start, he saw that he stood in front of the Last Chance.

The batwing squeaked open on rusty hinges, and a skinny little man stepped into the glare of sunlight. He wore his sixes thonged down against his legs, and his fingers were bony yellow claws. He was Trig Tapy.

The corners of the little man's thin lips twisted. "So you're on your pins again, Austin," he said harshly. "Well, this time I'll do better!"

His right hand dived toward a gun, filled and came up.

"I ain't armed!" Luke panted.

"So what?" Tapy grated.

Luke turned then and ran crazily along the street. He heard someone screaming. and realized that it was his own voice he was hearing. Something caught at his feet, and he went rolling in the hot dust. He stumbled to his feet and plunged on.

At the corner, he glanced back. Trig Tapy had disappeared. The street was empty. It came to him that Tapy had never intended to shoot, that the little killer was merely having a little fun. A flush of shame and anger swept over Luke's thin face. Shoulders slumped, he went on home, knowing that he'd lost his fight against fear.

Once in his small white home, he began to gather up odds and ends for packing. Tomorrow he and Jimmy would pull out. They'd go a long ways off, some place where people hadn't heard of the marshal of Salt Lick.

He flopped down on an old rocker and stared about. Jimmy had been born here, and here Jimmy's mother had died. This was home. It would be hard to leave.

That evening when he told the button they were leaving, the boy's freckled face went blank.

"But, Pop," he wailed, "I can't leave. Not now!"

"Why not?" Luke asked harshly.

"Because I ain't gone to the ol' mill after dark yet. I'm still scared of the dark —some."

"We're goin' tomorrow," Luke said shortly. "You can get over your scarin' someplace else,"

The boy's blue eyes filled. "But, Pop, I don't want to go someplace else. I want to stay here an'—"

"Quit your blubberin'," Luke clipped, "an' get to bed. We got a hard day ahead of us tomorrow."

The kid didn't say any more, but went into his room, looking like a whipped puppy.

Luke busied himself for a time, taking down some pictures and packing them in a box. Then he went into his own room, kicked off his boots and got ready for bed. He turned out the light, thinking that never again would he sleep in this room. The room he'd shared with Kate during those few good years he'd had her for his wife, and with Jimmy when he'd been a baby.

He woke suddenly and with the vague feeling that he'd heard a door slam. It was pitch dark in the room with only a faint

grayness coming from the open window. He listened. The wind had come up, and he knew it must be cloudy.

A feeling of uneasiness came over him, and he slid his feet into his boots and dressed, lit the lamp and went into the front room. Jimmy's door stood open. He let the light flicker into the room and saw that the small bed stood empty. Jimmy, he knew, had sneaked out this last night to go to the old haunted mill.

He went to the front door and glanced out. The darkness was so thick he seemed able to feel it. He felt a sharp stab of worry, knowing that Jimmy would have to cross the tumbled old mill dam to reach the mill itself. The kid might slip off in the darkness. Might break an arm or a leg.

A gust of wind whipped out the lamp. Luke didn't take time to re-light it. He shut the door and hurried toward the road. He was beyond the barn before he realized that in his worry and haste he'd unconsciously strapped on his twin Colts.

All the way to Salt Creek, he walked as quietly as possible. He didn't want to startle Jimmy, to undo all the work the kid had done in fighting his fear in the dark. Like his own work had been un-done this afternoon by Trig Tapy.

He reached the edge of the timber without spotting the boy. The path to the creek was as dark as the inside of an old boot. Luke groped his way along slowly, listening between steps, feeling vaguely that everything was too quiet.

The man came to the creek and followed it to the leaky dam. An owl hooted, and his hand dropped to his gun. He cursed himself for his jitters and felt his way across the rocky uneven top of the dam.

The old mill loomed up, black and towering. The wind whipped in across the shallow creek, cold and damp and whistling. A loose board on the building rattled. Luke felt a shiver steal over him, but shrugged it away impatiently.

FOR a moment, he stood at the end of the dam, the broken water wheel on his left, the building in front. No wonder, he thought, kids got an idea that the place was haunted. It was plenty spooky, all right.

And then he remembered Jimmy, and his worry tightened. By all rights, he should have met the kid along the path, or hear him now, tramping in the weeds around the building.

The wind had died down, and once more things were too quiet. He pushed forward, stepping on the edge of a rock and twisting his ankle. A soft curse slipped between his lips as pain stabbed up his leg.

Limping a little, he groped his way around the corner of the mill, shoving the tall weeds away from his face. A light gleamed faintly through a crack in the siding. A little grin came to Luke's face, and he felt a glow of pride. The button had gone in. He'd struck a light. He had found the courage to do all this on his last night in Salt Lick.

He started to turn back, and Jimmy's high-pitched voice cut through the stillness, driving the blood from the man's face.

"You'd better let me alone," the kid said, "or my Pop'll fix you!"

There was anger in the boy's voice. And panic.

Luke found the sagging door and put his shoulder against it. Not once did it enter his mind to be afraid. Not with Jimmy in there with some unknown danger. The door went to pieces under his weight, and he stumbled into the mill.

Black, cracked cross-beams held up the roof and the rat infested storage bins above. The floor was littered with dirt and broken board and some old ragged gunny sacks. A musty, rotten stench filled the air, and the stone burrs gleamed white and naked at the far end of the room in the light from a lantern resting on a wooden box. Jimmy stood with his small back against a wooden elevator spout. And at one side near the lantern stood two men. Wes Clapper and Trig Tapy.

Jimmy's eyes whipped up at the crash of the door.

"Pop!" he cried. "Pop, they was goin' to kill me! I found 'em counting money, an'—"

A sixgun's roar cut the boy short. Luke felt the wind of the bullet hot against his cheek, heard the lead tear through the rotten wall at his back.

Jimmy screamed, and something happened to Luke Austin. It turned him back into the fighting machine he had been. His

hands moved with their old sure quickness, came up with his own guns thundering death. He heard a man yell, saw him flung back against a pile of rusty machinery. The man had been Wes Clapper. Now he was a bleeding, lifeless thing.

Trig Tapy leaped behind the stone burrs and threw himself flat. His gun roared, and the lantern went out with a crash of glass.

Luke dropped to the floor. For a brief moment, he searched himself for a trace of his old fear. There didn't seem to be any of it left in him. And suddenly he understood why.

Now he was fighting for something that meant more to him than life itself. Something that meant so much to him that fear could hold no part in his feelings. He was fighting for Jimmy. His own flesh and blood. And in fighting for the boy, he had found the thing he had thought lost to him forever. His nerve. His old confidence. And once again recovered, it was as much a part of him as if it had never been lost.

He lifted his face from the splintery floor.

"Tapy," he called, "are you goin' to come out from behind that stone an' give yourself up. Or am I goin' to have to come an' get you?"

Tapy's answer was a burst of flame from his gun. Luke felt the bullet tug at his sleeve. He threw his gun down on the streak of orange and fired. He saw his bullet clip sparks from the mill stone, and knew he'd missed the man.

Tapy fired again, and Luke sent another burst at the flame. Tapy's voice rang out in a shrill cry, and something clattered against the burr—metal against stone. Tapy had dropped his gun.

Crouching low, Luke ran to the burr. His hand touched the cold stone, moved against the thin body sprawled over it. His fingers came away, wet and sticky warm. The body hadn't stirred, and he knew that Trig Tapy was dead.

HE struck a match and touched the flame to the wick of the chimneyless lantern. The light flared up, and Jimmy came out of his crouch by the elevator.

Open admiration shone in the button's eyes.

"I told 'em you'd come," he said. "I told 'em you'd fix 'em good if they hurt me!"

Luke didn't say anything right then. He couldn't. Seeing his boy unharmed did something to him, and he had to have a minute or two to swallow the lumps out of his throat.

"I saw a light in here," the boy went on. "Gee, Pop, I was scared! I started to run, an' then I remembererd this was my last chance to get over bein' scared here. So I went up to the door and walked right in.

"Wes Clapper an' Trig Tapy was by the lantern, countin' money. Lots of it. They said they was goin' to kill me so I couldn't tell anyone they was usin' the ol' mill for a hidin' place."

The boy shuddered, and Luke put his arm about the small shoulders.

"The money," Jimmy said, "is under that ol' rusty machinery. They put it there an' was goin' to take me someplace."

Luke found the money — the Barton Mine Payroll, old man Axel's cattle money, and the other loot that Clapper and Tapy had taken at various times in the last few months.

"Pop," Jimmy said abruptly, "I guess I don't mind goin' away so much now. I reckon it'll take more'n darkness to ever scare me again."

"I reckon it will," Luke said huskily. "But, son, we ain't goin' away. We got too much to attend to right here in Salt Lick to go chasin' around some'ers else."

He gave the boy's sandy hair a little roughing.

"Help me, son, an' we'll lug this loot over to Tom Rohn's store an' lock it in his safe for tonight. An' while I'm there, I reckon I might as well get my badge back from Tom."

The button's eyes shone like stars. Inside, he felt as if he were trying to sing a million laughing, sparkling songs all at the same time.

SIX-GUNS AND DESTINY

By A. C. PYNE

To this day historians of the Old Southwest are still bedeviled by the shoot-out that shocked San Antonio sixty-two years ago . . . and claimed the lives of the two most famous gunmen of that era.

John King Fisher
Lobos blinked and scurried for cover when Fisher traded the Owlhoot for a lawman's badge.

Ben Thompson when he was City Marshal of Austin, Texas, 1880-1881. He was rated the greatest gun-fighter in the West

OLD SAN ANTONIO started dating history from the night of March 11, 1884. When the curtain fell in Harris' Vaudeville theater that night, it fell on the last act of a drama which left that hard-boiled frontier city shocked to a whisper. On the floor of the wine room balcony in "a welter of blood which spilled down the steps making them as slippery as ice, and spattered the walls of the room" lay the two most famous gunmen who ever trod the narrow, crooked streets of the Mission City.

John King Fisher is a border legend. For nearly ten years he terrorized the Rio Grande Valley. He was accused of every crime in the decalogue in multiples. He was arrested innumerable times. He admitted to a friend that he had killed at least twelve men. But he was never convicted of a single offense. Whether or not he was guilty of the crimes charged to him has started some of the best arguments in the stirring history of the Rio Bravo.

In his role of border desperado he was something straight from the pages of a ten cent Wild West thriller. Fifty years later he would have been classed a stray from the Hollywood Corral. Certainly nothing quite approaching him was ever reported anywhere else in the universe.

His big white Mexican sombrero was a display of gold and silver ornament. Around the brim dozens of little silver bells tinkled with every movement of his head. His charro style buckskin jacket was trimmed with gold braid. He wore the finest of linen shirts, open at the throat with a big silk handkerchief knotted around his neck. Tailor made broadcloth

breeches were stuffed into hand made boots of the softest leather.

There were little silver bells on his inlaid spurs. He wore a long silk Mexican sash wound around his waist. His chaps, decorated with big silver conchas were made from the skin of a Bengal tiger. The silver studded belt around his waist was weighted with a pair of long barreled, silver plated, ivory handled forty-fives in hand tooled holsters. Anyone else sporting this paraphernalia would have been the subject of some frontier amusement. But no man ever looked into King Fisher's cold blue eyes and still felt the urge to be funny.

King Fisher was born in Kentucky in 1857. He came to Texas with his father, an unreconstructed rebel, at the close of the Civil War. The elder Fisher's refusal to concede that Lee's surrender ended hostilities got him into an argument with the army of occupation which left King an orphan. After his father's death King was cared for by some settlers in Goliad County. He showed early promise of becoming a nonconformist. He killed his first man before he was sixteen.

In 1872 a number of young Fisher's benefactors moved to Carrizo Springs in Dimmit County to start a new settlement. King was pointedly left behind. Not the least of the reasons for this snub was reputed to be his interest in a certain black-eyed member of one of the leading families.

The potential assets of the territory between the Nueces and the Rio Grande at that was represented principally by the "Dead or Alive" rewards offered for its leading citizens. The Nueces was called "The Sheriff's Deadline." The country beyond was a haven for wanted men from all over the nation and for many from below the border. Outlaws had become so powerful that they were electing their own members to public office.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that the new settlers decided that the boy they had left behind might possess unsuspected virtues. They sent for him. Even intimated that his aspirations were not as objectionable as they had at first thought.

ON his arrival he was appointed constable, and charged with the responsibility of protecting the settlers from the acquisitive habits of their neighbors. King soon proved that he had large quantities of what it took to discourage acquisitive habits. What his methods lacked in refinement they made up in effectiveness. A second application was seldom necessary.

He set up his own establishment on Pendencia Creek ten miles northwest of Carrizo Springs. And even for the time and place, this establishment possessed some unique features. The buildings were surrounded by stout stockade sprinkled with loopholes at convenient locations. Outside this every vestige of cover was cleared away for a distance of one hundred yards. At the forks of trail was a sign which read: "THIS IS KING FISHER'S ROAD. TAKE THE OTHER." Prudent men took the other. Fisher claimed that this was for protection against the Indians. But since the few Lipan Apaches who occasionally crossed the river to steal a cow or two had not acquired the art of reading English, the sign must have limited usefulness—against Indians.

With this stronghold as headquarters, Fisher gathered round him the choicest collection of cutthroats that ever rustled a cow or shot a man from ambush. His chief lieutenant, Frank Porter, whose real name was Burd Obenchain had followed a man all of the way from Kansas to Texas and killed him. Warren Allen had killed a negro at Fort Clark for entering the saloon where he was drinking. Jim Burdett was wanted in Austin for complicity in a killing there. The rest of the gang were of the same stripe.

This gang specialized in raiding ranches below the border and running herds of cattle and horses across the river. These were driven north and sold. But an animal wasn't denied their attention just because it happened to be on the Texas side of the river. Nothing was safe that couldn't be defended. On one occasion Fisher and Obenchain raided a herd below Eagle Pass which was being guarded by eight Mexicans. They rode down and killed the herders, afterward burying them all in one grave. Fisher named this "Frank Porter's graveyard." They would ride fifteen or twenty in a gang and shoot up some settler's house and then give him so many days to leave the country. Even

the county judge of Maverick County didn't dare sleep in his own home.

A man and his two sons followed the trail of their stolen horses to Fisher's camp. They were invited to dismount, and then shot while they were tying their horses. A man by the name of Donovan had a ranch below Eagle Pass. He got on bad terms with the gang. They killed two of his men and shot a number of his cattle. One night Donovan spent the night in a sheep camp about half way between Pendencia and Eagle Pass. The next morning he said that he was going to ride over and have a talk with Fisher. A day or two later he was found dead on the trail.

During 1876 and 1877 McNelly's Rangers arrested Fisher several times and placed him in jail at Eagle Pass only to have him make bond and beat them out of town. In his report to the Adjutant General, Captain McNelly wrote: "About half of the white citizens of three counties are friends of Fisher's. The remainder are too terrified to be of any assistance in keeping him even after he has been put in jail." Later Sergeant Armstrong wrote: "You could not persuade a man in this whole country to testify against King Fisher or any of his clan." Finally despairing of any help from local officials McNelly told Fisher: "The next time I come, I will shoot first and make arrests afterward." Fisher laughed and told him to come any time, he would try to entertain him. He hadn't learned that Lee McNelly's vocabulary was limited. The word "Bluff" wasn't in it.

On Oct. 1, 1876, Lieut. Hall, with six of McNelly's force, captured one of the gang by the name of Noley Key. After receiving the "McNelly treatment" for oral hesitation he was able to inform them that seven of the gang were holding about fifty stolen horses over on Lake Espantosa, some six miles from Pendencia. He said that Fisher and Obenchain had gone north with a herd of stolen cattle.

Taking Key along as guide, Hall set off for the rustler's camp. Approaching as near as they dared on horseback, Hall dismounted his men. Leaving a ranger named Devine in charge of the horses and the prisoner they crawled through the brush to the little cleared space surrounding the rustler camp.

At a signal from Hall the rangers charged the camp with guns blazing. The fireworks lasted less than two minutes. When it was over three rustlers had taken the "cure." A fourth would have to undergo extensive repairs before he would be serviceable again. The other three had escaped by jumping into the lake. When they got back to where Devine was guarding the horses, Key was not in sight.

"Where's Key?" asked Hall.

"He's laying over yonder," was the reply. "When the shooting started he tried to escape."

WITH an excellent prospect of finding himself in something a bail bond wouldn't get him out of, Fisher decided not to call himself to McNelly's attention again. By 1880 U. S. cavalry and Texas rangers had practically ruined the rustling business along the Rio Grande. Fisher's gang had either been planted out in the mesquite or departed for places where peace officers were less abrupt.

Fisher's next move was probably the greatest shock to hit any man wearing a badge. He proposed to lead an untarnished life in the future if they would start him off with a nice, new coat of whitewash. This was slightly unconventional even for the Texas frontier, but considering their past deals with the young man it looked like the best trade they were apt to get. So they took him up. Maverick County records disclose that on a single day, Judge Thomas Paschal dismissed seventeen indictments for murder against him for which he was out on bond to the tune of eighty-five thousand dollars.

Fisher moved his family to Uvalde where Sheriff John Boatright appointed him deputy sheriff. During the two terms he served in this capacity, his trigger work had the approval of the best people, and rangers only found it necessary to correct him once in his brand reading. On the other hand when the wild men from the chaparral visited Uvalde they cultivated a taste for sarsaparilla and attended prayer meeting instead of filling up with barb-wire extract and spending the evening shooting holes in the inhabitants. King had announced himself as candidate for sheriff and everybody expected him to be elected when business connected with his office

called him to the state capitol on March 11, 1884. Before leaving Uvalde he sent a wire to an old friend in Austin.

Ben Thompson, rated as the greatest gun fighter in the history of the West was city marshal in Austin. He and King Fisher were old side-kicks.

When Fisher's train pulled in Ben met it with team and buggy. He drove King up to the capitol building and waited until he had completed his business. Then he proceeded to introduce him to everything the capital city afforded in the way of entertainment. During the day Ben announced his intention of accompanying his friend as far as San Antonio on his return journey, a notion that King tried to discourage. A previous visit of Ben's had resulted in the loss of the town's leading gambler, who was incidentally, one of its most influential citizens. As a consequence Ben was about as popular in the City of Missions as a bull dog at a tomcat convention.

Fisher managed to slip away from Ben and get on the train without him. The train was already in motion when Thompson dashed up in his buggy and leaped aboard. On the way down he talked Fisher into stopping overnight in the city. The inducement was to see the celebrated Ada Gray turn on the pathos in "East Lynne."

Following the removal of Jack Harris on Ben's last visit, the Crystal Palace, or Harris' Vaudeville Theatre as it was better known, had been inherited by his two partners: Billy Simms and Joe Foster. Simms and Thompson were old friends, and Billy still professed his friendship in spite of Ben having killed his partner. Joe Foster was anxious to be included among the Austin man's admirers, but not until he had been surrounded by six silver handles.

Learning that the two men were in town, Simms sent then an invitation to drop over to the Vaudeville during the evening. He hinted at a big game.

Fisher and Thompson attended the play in the old Turner Hall on Houston Street where they remained until the end of the second act. During the intermission they decided to look in at the Vaudeville which was located on the corner of Commerce and Soledad Streets, a few blocks away.

On the way over they stopped and chatted a minute with John Payne, a cattleman who was sitting in front of the Southern Hotel. According to him, both men were in a jovial mood.

There have been innumerable stories told as to what happened after the two men entered the Vaudeville. No two exactly alike. All perhaps contained some truth. None contained the whole truth. Witnesses mysteriously disappeared. Men with no apparent eye affliction failed to see anything that took place. There was a sudden epidemic of amnesia.

According to testimony produced at the inquest, they went to the wine room balcony and seated themselves at a table against the wall. Ben sent for Billy Simms who came over and joined them. A round of drinks was ordered and disposed of. Then Jacobo Coy, a Mexican special officer attached to the place joined the group at the table. He shook hands with the two visitors and another round of drinks was consumed in a friendly atmosphere. Then for some reason which was never explained the four men got up and walked over to where Joe Foster was leaning on the balcony bar. Fisher shook hands with Foster and then attempted the role of peacemaker.

"Joe, I want you boys to shake hands and be friends," he said.

Ben put out his hand, but Foster just stared through his thick lensed glasses and made no move. Thompson stiffened and his eyes blazed.

"Damn you, I'm glad you won't shake hands," he snarled.

Whipping out his six-shooter with his right hand he slapped Foster across the face with his left.

"Joe Foster you're a damned thief and—."

The rest was drowned by roaring guns. Coy grabbed the barrel of Thompson's pistol and the five men resolved into a writhing, seething mass. It was over in a matter of seconds.

Ben Thompson, with five bullets in him, lay sprawled on the floor, his new white Stetson slowly turned a dark red, was crumpled under his head. His last words still echoing through the smoke-filled room were:

"Damn you, turn loose my gun."

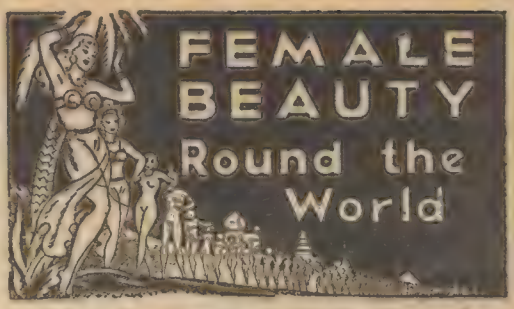
King Fisher lay with one leg drawn up under him, his head on Thompson's breast. He had been shot twelve times. A few feet away lay Joe Foster, his life slowly oozing out through a forty-five bullet hole, Ben Thompson's only shot.

The Austin Statesman shrieked that it was "a brutal and cowardly murder." *The San Antonio Light* declared that "it was justified and done in self defense." *The Express* confined its comments on one of the most famous killings in the west to a short item on the back page under the heading of "A Good Night's Work," and an inter-city feud was on which lasted for decades.

FRIENDS of the men declared that it was a well-planned trap, claiming that they had been shot without warning by riflemen hidden in the boxes which lined each side of the balcony. These boxes were provided with curtains which could be drawn, concealing the occupants from anyone on the balcony, but leaving the balcony in plain view from the inside. This theory was substantiated years later by a hanger-on of the Vaudeville. It was significant that these boxes which were usually filled with patrons who might desire a little seclusion, should be mysteriously vacant on this particular night. Also that no autopsy was performed. And City Marshall Phil Shardein never explained how he happened to be just outside the building with a squad of police when the shooting occurred.

It seems ironic if not incredible that the two most deadly gunmen of all time, men whose sagacity and lightning speed had brought them through countless battles unscarred should be wiped out by men in plain sight and whom they had reason to watch, without doing more damage themselves. Ben Thompson, with his gun already in his hand, was able to fire but a single shot. King Fisher died with his ornate guns in their hand-tooled holsters.

The sealed lips of Billy Simms and Jacobo Coy retained the key to some mysteries which still bedevil historians of the old Southwest.



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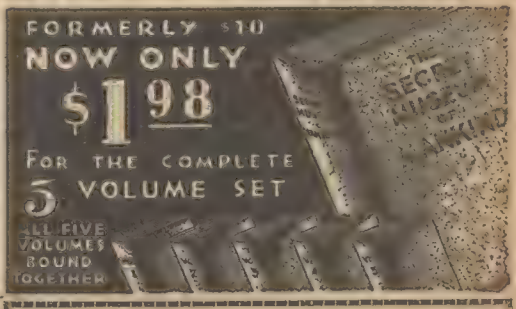

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DRIFTERS SPELL TROUBLE

By D. B. NEWTON

Destiny beat him down to trail-bum stature; slapped him with the welcher's brand . . . then threw him the "fight or die" challenge.

A BITTER MOOD roweled Rod Benton as, pack mule trailing, he came down out of the hills above Gold Gulch where he had worked and searched in vain. The boomers were still pouring in, darkening the trail that climbed by sharp grades and switchbacks, out of the flatlands and over the lift of sunblasted hills. But there was the beginning of a counter current now, bucking the stream of horsemen and wagons and those who toiled on foot up the barren steep. Sooner or later the world outside would learn the truth—that the big Gold Gulch strike had played itself out; the boom was busted.

Just another rainbow, it had been for Rod Benton, but with no pot of gold waiting at the end of it. This was the old, set pattern, shaped of a bad fortune that dogged his days . . . At the straggling edge of camp Benton halted now, impatiently, as a sudden voice cut in on his unpleasant thoughts. "Been up to the diggin's, friend?"

Rod's mouth dragged down. Another boomer, one whose eager tone marked him for a new arrival, unaware as yet of the false lure that had drawn him there. The man was sitting on a boulder at the head of the steep trail, resting after his climb, a light pack thrown and lying on the stony ground beside him. Rod Benton saw a slight figure, grizzled hair, eyes that were faded by years of sun and wind.

"Yeah," the younger man answered

shortly. "I been up there, all right. Take my tip and don't waste your time!"

Disappointment ran into the face of the oldster. "You mean all the claims are taken?"

"I mean there's nothing in there! The streams showed good color at first but it's played out already. Not enough mineral is being panned in a day to pay for a man's grub at boom camp prices!"

"But what about these?" The oldster dug quickly into his pack, came pegging toward Benton with lifted hands holding up two big rocks that had the glint of gold fire threading through them. "These samples ain't come out of no sluice box! They're the sign of a solid outcropping of good rich stuff!"

Rod Benton took only a brief look at the ore and shrugged. "Yes, I've seen those things floating around. We all have. But nobody seems to know who started them circulating, and certainly nobody's found any more like them."

"You ain't sayin'—?"

"I'm saying you may as well throw them away. They're phonies!"

The oldster's hands clenched hard upon the samples, his eyes blazed. "No!" he cried. "I've followed strikes all across the West, for more years than you can name, son. I've struck it, and I've lost it again. And I got faith in these here samples!

"They don't look like any ore I've ever seen. They come from a rich new strike, I tell you, as sure as my name is Nick Catlett!"

"All right," Rod answered. He picked up the reins. "Good luck to you, dad. But I'm getting out."

The old man's face had a fanatic gleam to it. He said: "First, I got to dig me up an outfit—"

Benton grunted. He jerked a thumb back toward the mule at the end of his lead rope, sawbuck saddle loaded heavily with supplies, and with pick and shovel and tools. He said: "There you are, if you want it. All yours for just ten green dollars!!"

So, without the pack mule now, Rod rode on into the straggling camp of Gold Gulch. His horse picked its way along a rutted street, against the restless flow of traffic pulsing raggedly through its dust.

A SULLEN, dangerous tension seemed to hang in the breathless air. Rod Benton felt that strongly. He could see the scowls on the faces of thwarted goldseekers, knotted in useless, arguing groups along the twisted street lined with its tents and clapboard buildings. He could sense their mood exactly for it was the same bitter self-mockery that gnawed at his own bad humor.

The first thing he wanted was a drink. It would help to fortify him against the humiliating chore he had waiting, after that. He found a place for his bronc at the crowded rail before the Nugget, stepped down into ankle-deep dust.

Directly across from the big saloon stood the camp's one other imposing building, a long, frame structure that housed the combined mercantile, store rooms, and branch office of the Halleck Freight Lines, with its wagon yard and stable at the back. As he snubbed reins about the gnawed hitch pole, Rod Benton looked over at the huge, barnlike building and found himself already trying to phrase the speech he would make to Jonathan Halleck.

No use of that. Benton shrugged, turned away and took the two broad steps up to the swinging doors of the Nugget. He stood alone at the crude pine bar tasting the drink. He was a tall, wide-shouldered figure, in flat, broad brimmed black hat, brown coat, pantslegs shoved into the tops of scuffed boots.

The hand that held the shot glass was long fingered, capable, and marked with scars of a dozen trades. On his own since the age of twelve, Rod had worked and worked hard, constantly, for fifteen years. And so far, he thought dismally, all his working had got him just about nowhere. That had been the appeal of this latest venture—this search for the gold that should have lined his pockets and given him at least a chance at fulfillment of his dreams. But the hope had flickered out. It looked as though he just wasn't one of those destined to stub their toes on a fortune, and he had been crazy, after all these years, to think otherwise.

"Here's to Lady Luck!" he grunted, grinning flatly; and tossed down the whiskey.

Sudden silence caught his attention as he set the empty glass down. He pivoted

slowly, facing the others at the bar. He saw a dozen men, prospectors, and boom camp followers, and all of a tough, hard-grained cast. He saw the sharp features of Bill Johns, owner of the Nugget, a tall man in loose-fitting clothes and with a brush of roan mustache under his high-bridged nose. Johns had been holding talk with a pair of toughs at the bar; but now the eyes of all the men were trained on Benton, and Bill Jones said, harshly: "Yeah, he's one of 'em, all right!"

Rod frowned, returning the saloon man's stare. "One of what?"

"One of that crew of thieves from over yonder," Johns grunted, and he jerked a thumb toward the saloon's front window. Puzzled, Benton followed his gesture and saw what Johns was pointing at—the big freight warehouse standing in sunlight across the shadowed street. "You mean Halleck Lines?" Rod demanded.

"Hell, yes! Your name's Benton, ain't it? One of that crook Halleck's top men—"

"Just a minute!" Rod snapped. "In the first place, there's nothing crooked about Jonathan Halleck. Everybody in this state ought to know the reputation he's built for himself and his freighting business. And secondly, I don't work for him—not any more. I've been back in the hills on my own, the past two months looking for gold."

At that, guffaws burst from the hard mouths of the men about him. A voice growled, disdainfully: "I just bet you have!"

Rod Benton's eyes narrowed. There was a danger here, that he did not quite understand. But he'd seen it before in other faces in this embittered, busted camp.

THE men had moved in a little on him. Fronting them, Bill Johns faced Rod squarely with thumbs hooked in waistcoat pockets, the tails of his coat pushed back far enough to show a sixshooter in the holster on his lean thigh. Benton remembered his own gun was in his saddle pocket.

"You don't expect us to believe that?" Johns challenged. "That a man who was in with Halleck at the rigging of this frameup, would be dumb enough to rise to the bait himself? It just won't wash!"

Rod caught the drift then. "Why, you all must be out of your heads!" he grunted, swinging a look that took in the grim circle. "Even if there actually was trickery behind this Gold Gulch rush you wouldn't have a grain of reason for thinking the Halleck Lines were involved."

"No?" Johns sneered. "Take a look in their warehouse across the street. Empty! Look at the shelves in their store—sold clean! On the other hand I can show you barrels of liquor piled up in my stockroom and stacks of goods rotting on the hands of every other merchant in camp.

"It cost us a hell of a lot to freight that stuff up here. It will cost still more to haul it out again. More profits in Halleck's pocket! He's the only man who isn't going to be caught short by the camp's folding, the only one who acted all along as though he knew there wasn't any gold here—wasn't anything at all behind this boom.

"I say he did know it—that the whole thing was a frameup with old man Halleck piling up the profits at the expense of the rest of us!"

"I tell you you're wrong!" Rod repeated. "Dead wrong!"

"Of course, you'd say that!" Johns retorted. "I know you—you're a Halleck man from away back. The old man knows how much cash it takes to pay for loyalty. Or for a son-in-law . . ."

Rod Benton's fist cracked sharply on the side of Johns' jaw. He felt the pain running up his arm, and he saw Johns go reeling hard against the flimsy, makeshift bar. Bottles and glasses danced. Rod said, sharply: "Leave Halleck's daughter out of this!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a weight of bodies smashed into him and he went down under them, fighting.

Four men had piled on him. Blows rained wildly against his bent shoulders; a boot caught him in the thigh with crippling force. Benton smashed a blow at one bearded face, watched it drop away.

There were too many of them and they pressed in. Blind rage and long-festering suspicion drove them at this first tangible enemy. Rod broke free, put his back to the bar and stood them off—arms swinging, fists pounding, whipcord body taking the punishment they dealt. There was the tang of blood in his mouth. Hard

knuckles bounced off his cheekbone. His eye started to swell. Half blinded, he kept on slugging at the grunting wall of flesh, while the blows rained fierce upon him.

A voice or two among the onlookers were beginning to rise in protest. Rod never heard them. A bottle in a barkeep's fist dealt a clubbing blow across the back of the neck. He went down. He went clear out for a moment. Then he could feel the hard floor beneath him, hear the excited voices of the men, as from a distance. They seemed to be arguing, debating what to do with him. After some minutes of this, rough hands seized his battered body and he knew vaguely he was being hauled across the splintered planks, through the swinging batwings.

The sharp bite of dust stung at his nostrils and battered lip, when they dropped him into the gutter there at the edge of the boardwalk.

He came to his feet, staggering. Another man might have headed for the gun in his saddlepocket, gone charging back into the saloon with weapon smoking; but to Rod Benton that seemed an empty gesture.

Blind anger and suspicion eating at those miners had made them pile on him like that. Looking at the window he could see their faces, watching, and melting back quickly as they caught his glance. He realized then they were already sobering, regretting already their unfair attack.

He shrugged the thing away. His flat-topped hat lay in the dust and he picked it up, brushed it carefully, put it on. He knocked the dirt out of his clothing, touched one sleeve gingerly at his bleeding lip. The eye, he could tell, was still swelling, and it was painful.

Rod turned his back on the Nugget and walked to the freight warehouse on the other side of the street.

Coming into the booming silence of the big, gloomy building he was struck first by the emptiness of it. A man who wore pink sleeve bands around his gaunt arms lounged behind the counter. He showed his surprise at Benton's appearance. "Halleck in, Vickers?"

"Why, yes. In the back, I think." The clerk wanted to ask some questions of his own, probably, but without waiting for them Benton limped past him around the end of the counter, pushed through the partition door and into the main storage space of the warehouse.

II

IT WAS huge and dark and empty. Wide loading doors standing open at the head of a short ramp made a rectangle of sunlight in the other end, and Jonathan Halleck himself was directing the loading of crates and boxes into the body of a freight wagon. Benton started over there, bootheels echoing hollowly on the rough floorboards.

Uneasy thoughts were tugging at him. Things Bill Johns had said—about Halleck being the only merchant in camp not caught short by the end of the boom. The bareness of this room underscored the question in his mind.

Then Halleck had heard his step and he whirled sharply as Rod emerged from the shadows. Startled fear showed in his face an instant but it died quickly when he recognized his visitor. He shrugged as though angry at his lack of control.

The boss and founder of the rich Halleck Freight Lines was a small, thin man with crisp blue eyes and a neat, clipped white beard. His every movement held the vigor and authority which had enabled him to build up his extensive business. Now he put a quick glance over the tall frame of the younger man. He didn't miss the battered lips or the swollen eye.

He made no comment, however. He only grunted, said shortly; "So you're back.

"Yes, I—"

Halleck interrupted, swinging away from him to shout at one of the loaders who had dropped a heavy box. Rod waited in awkward silence. This scene, he thought, was going to be even worse than he had anticipated.

"Well!" Old Jonathan was back, pouncing on the subject again. "I suppose you brought out all that mineral you boasted about?"

"No," Benton admitted. Swallowing his pride he added: "I didn't even find color!"

"I told you there wasn't any gold in there but you wouldn't take my word for it. Next time maybe you'll know better

than to throw over a good job for a wild chance at a fortune!"

"Maybe so." Rod tried hard to smile but it didn't come off. Then there was the beginning of a silence. Rod said, "Well—" And hesitated. Halleck didn't help him any; just stood there waiting. Benton shifted his feet in the dust.

"Well," he got out, finally. "You might try me again with that job now."

Jonathan Halleck stiffened. Arms akimbo, he stepped back and tilted his head, stared up at the other with unfriendly eyes. "You expected me to wait two months for you to get over your wild-goose chase? Don't be ridiculous! You had your chance at managing the branch office down at Wing. I wanted you for it but you figured it wasn't good enough or something, and I had to put Kirby Short in.

"Short's a good man, too. And what's more, he stuck with me; didn't go hunting after fool mineral that wasn't there. I can't throw him out now just because you decide, a couple of months later, that you want the place!"

It had been bad enough to come back, empty handed, and beg for the job he'd once turned down, but somehow it hadn't occurred to him that he might find himself unwanted. He knew suddenly what he had done—thrown away his one real opportunity, after all the hard years!

Thrown it away because the excitement and lure of the gold strike had been too much for him. And because he had seen Halleck's blue-eyed daughter, Martha, who was used to wealth and comfort; and that had made the need of a quick success imperative.

Well, it was done. He lifted his shoulders in a futile gesture. "I don't suppose that you got any other kind of work for me—anything at all?"

Halleck frowned. "Afraid not. I'm closing out this Gold Gulch branch now that camp's busted. Got the last of my stock on the wagon there. Sorry—"

"It's all right. Well . . . Thanks!"

He was starting away when the old man called him back suddenly.

"Just a minute!" Halleck showed new interest. "Maybe we can work out something, at that. Maybe your coming today solves a big problem for me." He glanced around, jerked his head toward the dark interior of the storeroom. "Let's go inside where we can talk it over."

They sat on an empty wooden crate while the old man made his proposition.

"There's a box I have to move out of here," he explained. "It's full of cash and gold dust. I'm worried about it. Benton, I've got enemies in this camp. Men that have spread lies and loose talk about me. Maybe you've heard some of what they say?"

He waited, and Rod Benton replied, carefully: "Yes, I've heard—something."

"There's blind, puddin'-headed fools who'll believe such stuff," Halleck went on. "Because I've used my head and cleared a profit here at Gold Gulch they're ready to blame me for their own bad luck. What's more, they watch me like a hawk! I can feel their eyes." He slammed a tight, heavily veined fist against the top of the crate.

"The varmints are just waiting for me to take that money out so they can waylay the shipment. They'd like to kill me, too, I think! That's the temper of their damn camp right now."

ROD said nothing. He was wondering how much of the truth old Halleck spoke. The man was afraid, deathly afraid. He had suspected that from the first startled glance Halleck had thrown at him as Benton came walking out of the shadows. He asked himself now if that could be, in part at least, the work of a guilty conscience.

Halleck was a hard and grasping man but, Benton had always supposed, a scrupulously honest one. For the first time, he knew his moment of doubt. There were a number of things that could, with a little imagination, be totaled to a different answer. The emptiness of this warehouse, for one; and the times when, as he now remembered, Halleck had tried to give him blunt warning: *"I tell you there's no gold in there, kid! I know there isn't! Why can't you take my word for it?"* It was a statement which had meant nothing to him at the time but which now hinted a sinister meaning.

He came out of these thoughts with the startled awareness that Halleck was looking at him sharply, and that the man had

just asked a question. As Rod hesitated he repeated what he had last said: "Well, will you do it?"

Rod flushed. He muttered: "I—I'm afraid I didn't quite catch all you said. I was thinking of something."

"Oh!" Halleck made an impatient gesture. "Maybe I'm wrong," he growled. "Maybe I shouldn't even have brought this up. I thought you were someone I could rely on; and that's what I need—bad. I don't want to advertise that gold shipment by sending an army with it; what's more, I couldn't be sure of the loyalty of any gunfighters I might hire in this camp. What I want is one man—one that's equally handy with a gun and a freight team. And one I can absolutely count on. For a minute I was hoping you might be him."

Benton nodded. "Maybe I am," he said, quickly. "Yeah, if you think you can trust me, I'll take the shipment through for you."

"It would be a dangerous job," Halleck warned him again, as though reluctant now to take Rod's offer. "I'm certain the whole camp knows I'm sitting on this box of dust, and my enemies may have spies on the inside to tip them off as to just when it's ready to leave. If that were the case, it would be too bad for you, Benton!"

"A chance we have to count on," Rod said, with a shrug. "I'm willing to risk it!"

Halleck stood up, and Benton thought his shoulders seemed a little straighter than they had been before. Then the young man eased to his own feet.

"I'm glad you came back, Rod—and I apologize for talking the way I did. I guess I been on a frayed edge for weeks. Let's be very frank—Halleck Lines is over-expanded. I borrowed heavily to start this Gold Gulch branch and I need that money and dust if I ever hope to pay off. Should it fail to go through I might stand to lose everything!"

Benton's shock was plain. "As bad as that? I had no idea!"

"As bad as that." Halleck nodded somberly. "Even my daughter doesn't know. But if this gold reaches the branch at Wing there'll be nothing to worry about. And I promise you won't be forgotten, either. I'll notify Kirby Short to find a job for you—some kind of a job, I don't know what yet. See me through this, boy, and I'll do the same for you!"

It wasn't a promise Rod Benton could take very seriously—not if Kirby Short was involved. There had been too much rivalry between him and Kirby in the months when both had been interested in that Wing branch management as well as in old Halleck's daughter. If it was left up to Short now to find work for his defeated rival, it would likely be a job cleaning the stables. No, there was not room in the organization for both of them.

But Rod did not say anything of this to Halleck. Overnight he made his decision. He would take this wagon with its precious cargo down through the hills to the Wing station, and then he would drift. He would do it, in spite of the danger, in return for Halleck's former kindnesses—and most of all, for the sake of Halleck's blue-eyed daughter. And he would close his mind, for the time being, to any half-formed suspicions he might have of Halleck.

IT was with these thoughts that he climbed to his place on the high seat of the canvas-topped freight wagon next morning. His six-gun was strapped about his waist, and a double-loaded shotgun had been stowed under the seat. He had an idea he was going to need both. There would be no company for him on this trip except weazened, pinch-faced Chip Dugan, sent along to work the brake on the steep pitches and do general flunky work in camp and Chip would be no great help in an emergency.

With the weight of responsibility squarely on his shoulders, Rod dragged his hat down firmly, kicked off the brake. Across the street he caught sight of Bill Johns standing in front of his saloon. A scowl rode his features as he watched the mules lean into the harness and the big wagon roll away. Even when he was out of sight, and the shacks and tents of Gold Gulch were sliding past and the open road lay ahead, Rod remembered the face of the saloon keeper and the burning interest that showed in his sharp eyes.

Then speculation was lost in the pressure of his task, as the heavy wagon took the downward road through the barren mountains. It was a terrific, sweating, swearing job, with both Benton and the swamper

struggling to keep the wagon upright and prevent it from running down the mules as it took the sharp switchbacks and the steep slant of the crude, ungraded road. Dust billowed chokingly, and through it Rod Benton fought his way against the stream of traffic that still flowed, unceasingly, up toward the busted camp. The sun bore down, with blasting heat; the sear, brown lifts of the hills baked beneath its breathless weight.

It took a good man to handle a wagon and team on that road. Benton, straining at the ribbons, shirt glued to his back by scalding sweat as he shouted orders at Chip Dugan working at the brakehandle, knew a sudden sharp anger for the merchants of the camp who had protested the rates Jonathan Halleck charged them. Let Bill Johns tool a freight rig over that treacherous road just once, or try to hire a man who would be willing to do it! He'd soon learn—

The hours dragged on and the great fiery ball of the sun wheeled across a brassy sky. And then, at last, the worst of the job was over and the road beginning to level off as the main body of the hills was left behind.

Noon had passed, the sun tipping over toward the western peaks. Rod ran his wagon off the road onto a grassy flat where there was some water and feed for the weary mules. While Benton anchored the ribbons and swung down to stretch his legs, Chip Dugan checked the brake quickly. The shoe was smoking from the constant friction. Frequently one would have to be replaced after the long haul down from Gold Gulch.

Rod walked around the wagon checking the wheels and timbers and the lashing of the canvas. Dugan was unhitching the mules, a pair at a time, and taking them to the stream to water. The first hint that they were not alone here came with the faint sound of a football in the dry grass behind Rod.

He whirled away from the wheel he was examining, right hand stabbing downward toward his gun. He did not make the draw. The man who had the drop on him had appeared from nowhere, apparently; though now Benton noticed the boulder where he had obviously been hiding. Cursing himself futilely for his carelessness, he faced the man and the heavy weapon that was in his hand, trained point blank at the Halleck driver.

At the same moment, he was wondering who this man was. Rod had seen him before, and recently, he was sure; but he could not quite remember. A tall, skinny red-head, with mean eyes.

The man with the gun said: "All right, Bud! I see a Colt in your belt holster. You lift it out real careful and toss it over here to me!"

Benton moved to obey, very carefully, so that the other could not doubt his intentions. Yet when he had the gun free of the leather he stooped suddenly and instead of throwing it at the feet of his captor skimmed it back under the wagon. A curse exploded from the redhead. "You asking to get killed, brother?" he yelled. "I said throw that gun to me!"

Rod grunted: "You got my fangs pulled—that ought to satisfy you. That gun's a pet of mine. I don't want you toting it away with you when you stop wasting your time here and ride out."

"I'm not wasting my time!" the redhead muttered, and his lips smiled.

Now another man came around the wagon, herding Chip Dugan ahead of him at the point of a .45. This one was huge and stocky, his dark face disfigured by an ugly hairlip; and one glance at that mark told Rod immediately where he had seen both these hombres before. They were the pair Johns had been talking to when Rod entered the saloon yesterday. They had not taken part in the fight that followed.

Rod's shoulders pressed against the wagon wheel, arms raised. He watched the man with the hairlip punch Dugan into line with the other's own sixgun; he saw Chip trembling and stumbling over the uneven ground, breath wheezing from his parted lips, a picture of terror. Rod had known when he started that the swamper would be of little use in an emergency.

The man with the hairlip spoke with a thick burr. "All right, where's the gold?"

"I don't know, mister—honest!" Dugan wheezed hastily. The stickup grunted and whirled on Rod. "Okay, driver! You dig out that box of dust for us!"

Rod looked innocent. "What box? I didn't pack this rig. I just handle the mules. I'm damned if I know what I'm

carrying."

"Like hell you don't! Things are pretty tough for you right now, bucko, and they're apt to get tougher. You better not hold out on us!"

"If there's any gold on that wagon," Rod lied, evenly, "I don't know where it is. You think different? Then hunt for it yourself."

The redhead snapped: "Go ahead, Yuma. I don't think we're gonna get anything out of this smart boy. Why don't you climb inside and take a look while I keep the pair of 'em covered?"

His partner cursed some more, but he took the suggestion. He holstered his gun, using both hands to lift himself strongly up to the high tail gate and across it; and then, through the canvas and the sides of the wagonbox, they could hear him stumbling about in the half-darkness, pawing over the well-stowed cargo.

Rod waited.

A sudden shout, muffled by the dust-streaked canvas, came to him. "I think I've found it!" the man cried. "Yeah—this is it! And heavy as hell."

Excitement tensed the redhead, made him turn partly away from the two men he was covering. It was the moment Rod had been aiming for. He hurled himself full length beneath the wagon, rolling, hard fingers clawing for the gun he had thrown there.

Then the redhead had recovered from his surprise and was swinging back, triggering. Lead thunked the dust at Benton's elbow. Jaw tight, waiting any moment for the slug that would finish him, he got a grip on the fallen sixshooter, lifted it, drew a hasty bead. As the trigger bit against his squeezing finger and the gun roared in a burst of powder and flame, he saw the gunman stagger.

He did not wait for more. He was already scrambling out on the far side of the wagon, getting his feet under him, as a startled cry broke from the hairlipped man inside. There was a heavy thud as he dropped the box he had been trying to heft. Yuma pawed aside the thick canvas cover, thrust his ugly head out, big right hand grabbing for the sixgun he had shoved into its holster.

He never got a hand on it. Rod Benton, leaping to the hub of the rear wheel, reached far and the barrel of his Colt swung in a clubbing arc. Yuma's hat tumbled from his head; with a heavy grunt he buckled across the tailboard, hung there with arms dangling. The gun, slipping from the mouth of his holster, dropped into the thick dust at the rear of the wagon.

Springing down quickly, Rod Benton snapped that weapon from the ground and he came up with both hands filled, turning the barrels of his two guns full on the cursing, arm-shattered redhead.

III

FULL NIGHT had come by the time they rolled into Wing, and lamps were burning in the windows of the town; but the Halleck Lines branch office was dark, and only an old tin lantern on a nail by the stable door cast its light faintly across the big wagon yard. Rod kicked on the brake, swung down tiredly. "I'll take a look," he said. "Maybe there's a night man on duty."

But the office door was tightly locked, and the old man who had charge of the stable must have stepped across to a saloon to get a bucket of beer. Rod came back to the wagon. "Where does Short hang out, do you know?"

"Yeah," Dugan answered. "He's got a room at the hotel."

"Go find him, will you, and send him over? You can take off then, as far as I'm concerned. I'll wait here with the wagon until he shows up."

Dugan climbed down and shuffled off. Rod took a seat on a bench beside the stable door, under the lantern, and rolled a cigarette. The mules stamped in the harness, restlessly. Rod grunted: "Take it easy. There'll be someone around in a minute to take care of you."

But it was a half hour before anyone appeared. Then the crippled old stableman arrived, his breath heavy with alcohol, and with numerous apologies set to work unhitching the teams. Rod paid little attention to him, because he had caught the sound of Kirby Short's firm tread echoing along the boardwalk outside the wagon yard fence. There were other steps—lighter, quicker.

Rod was on his feet, hat in hand, as Short came through the gate with Martha

Halleck on his arm. To Rod's hungry eye she had never looked prettier. She had on a fluffy yellow evening gown and wrap, and with her long brown curls and the sparkle of her blue eyes as she smiled at him, she made a lovely picture even in the poor light of the tin lantern. She said: "I'm so glad to see you—"

Kirby Short was dressed up, too, and he looked irritated. He said, briefly: "Evening, Benton. Chip Dugan had to run us down at the Odd Fellows' Hall—there's a dance tonight, and I wasn't expecting any business. Chip tells me you've got dust and money in the wagon."

Reluctantly, Rod Benton took his attention from the girl. "Yeah," he told Short. "A whole box of it. And somebody at least knew I was coming because they held me up and tried to hijack the shipment!"

He heard Martha's startled gasp, saw Short's head swing around sharply to stare at him. "A pair of gunthrowers," Rod went on. "But I managed to stop them. I got them tied up in the back of the wagon."

"You *what?*"

Abruptly Short turned on his heel, strode back there with Rod and Martha trailing. "I was thinking," Rod expalined, "we could work them over—make them tell us where the leak of information was. Halleck was trying to keep this shipment a secret but someone within the organization sold him out—"

Short had the canvas pulled open, was staring into the rear of the wagon. He shot a strange look at Benton—a look that made Rod hurry past the girl and join him at the tail gate. As he glanced inside, a sharp frown built itself into Rod Benton's face.

"Well?" prompted Short.

Benton shook his head a little, in bewilderment. "Gone!" he muttered. "I—I don't understand it! I know I tied them plenty tight; and even the ropes are missing—"

Short let the canvas fall with a sharp jerk, and turned to face Rod squarely. The expression on his face was not pleasant. "Now listen, Benton!" he growled. "Is this some kind of a joke? Because if it is, I don't think it's very damn funny!"

The other did not understand his meaning at first. "You think I'm lying?" he exclaimed. "Why on earth would I?"

"Damned if I know!" Short answered.

Martha broke in: "Kirby, of course, he's not lying! How many men were there Rod? Could you identify them?"

"Certainly. There were two. I saw both of them hanging around Gold Gulch before I started. One's sort of a skinny redhead—I got that one in the arm, with a bullet. And the other was a big bruiser, with a hair lip. Ask Dugan."

"I intend to," Short muttered dryly. "Although he didn't say a word to me about any stickup when he came looking for me at the dance. That don't sound like Chip!"

"Well, anyway, it's the truth!" Rod retorted. "They were in the back of the wagon, tied up. Now they're gone!"

"Maybe they took the gold with them, huh?" Short suggested.

Rod shook his head. "No. I moved the box under the seat, into the boot. Just a minute and I'll hand it down to you."

IT was a large box, padlocked, and very heavy. Short received it from Rod, and as the latter leaped down again from the high seat Martha had the door of the office unlocked and they went inside.

"I'll just check on this first, in your presence, Martha," said Short. Rod put the box on the desk and tried the keys until he found one that would snap the lock. It took only a glance at the contents to show that all was intact; there were rolls of bills, buckskin pouches heavy with dust and gold nuggets. Short grunted his satisfaction, and Rod knew immense relief that the money on whose delivery Jonathan Halleck had depended so much was now safely at its destination.

Short closed the lid again, clicked the lock. "Good enough," he grunted. "We'll just put this in the safe, Martha, until your father sends further instructions . . ."

When the iron safe in the corner had received the box of money and the knob had been spun, Short arose, dusting off his knees, and turned to the girl. "Shall we get back to the dance now?"

"No, Kirby," she said. "I—I'm feeling rather tired. I think I'd rather go home, if you don't mind too much."

"Of course not!" Short agreed, but he was obviously disappointed. Now they

were outside the office again, the lamp extinguished, and Short paused to lock the door. In the big wagon yard, the night hostler had the mules unhitched and in their stalls, with grain thrown down to them. The unloading of the heavy freight wagon would wait until morning.

Martha turned to Rod, hand extended. "I'm so glad to see you again, Rod. You'll be around tomorrow, won't you, and tell me everything you've been doing?"

"If you like," he promised. "Good night, Martha."

He stood alone and watched them disappear through the high gate, the girl and the man, his hand upon her arm possessively. Then Rod Benton dragged his flat-topped hat on again, shrugged. To tell the truth, he had not yet made up his mind for sure what he would do tomorrow. It was a strong temptation to stay, just to be near Martha Halleck—to sit with her, to look into her eyes and hear the music of her laughter. And yet—the way things had turned out—

No, he ought to stick to his first decision. He had brought the shipment through for Halleck; now it was time to drift. It would be no solution, staying and putting himself under the thumb of a man like Kirby Short. It still rankled—the way Short had accused him of lying.

He found a restaurant and ordered a meal. While he waited in the booth he thought of the events of the past few hours.

There were the suspicions about Jonathan Halleck. Whatever his feeling for Martha, Rod could not work for any man he could not trust. And yet— That stickup today pointed clearly to a spy within the Halleck organization—some trusted person who knew about that gold shipment, and had sold out his employer. And the mysterious escape of the prisoners Rod had taken ruined the one chance of uncovering the spy's identity.

Perhaps, he thought suddenly, he could not leave now even if he wanted to. In spite of Kirby Short; in spite of any questions as to the part Halleck might have taken in rigging a phony gold rush. For there was Martha. She, certainly, was innocent, and her interests must be protected.

With all these matters still occupying his troubled mind, he finished eating, paid his bill, and went out again to Wing's main street. A block farther on, the dance at the Odd Fellows' Hall was in full swing, the music filling the quiet night. Rod Benton leaned against a post of the wooden arcade over the sidewalk, listening. He was too tired to dance, and his pockets were empty now. He didn't even have the price of a hotel room left. He eased erect, presently; turned, and headed at a leisurely pace back to the freight yard, to hunt a bed in the hay of the stable.

He came through the high gate of the wagon yard, past the black frames of the freight rigs parked along the fence around the compound. The lantern before the barn had gone out; Rod had to feel his way across the shadowed yard, and in through the wide doors. It was pitch black inside, with the smells and sounds of the barn thick around him and the hay and straw underfoot. Suddenly Rod stumbled over something, barely caught himself. He knelt and his hands found the sprawled body of a man. He knew by the clothes that it was the crippled barn-tender and there was a stickiness at the back of the man's head as he lay huddled there upon his face.

He came to his feet quickly, turning toward the gaping doors. He was glad now he had not struck a match, following his first impulse. His eyes, adjusted now to the darkness, could distinguish the blocked-out shapes and shadows of the yard; and sighting the door of the freight line office he started for there at a run, dragging the six-gun free as he went.

The door was standing open. He had seen that much, and he knew what it meant. And against the blackness of the tiny room there was a faint gleam of light that flickered for an instant and went out, as a match flame might have done.

Then he was at the door. Blocking out the light of the window across the room, near the safe, a dark figure moved briefly. Benton, gun raised, came in over the sill of the door, ducking sideward to take his shape out of its faint brightness.

He caromed hard into a man's body, heard the grunt of expelled breath. Rod slipped to one knee, came driving up again. And in that instant a crushing blow took him across the back of the skull, heavily. He went down—and out!

IT was the man with the hairlip—Yuma —who brought him his breakfast. The red-head was having trouble with the bullet hole Benton had drilled into his gun-arm, and he would as soon have let their prisoner starve. But Yuma had other ideas, though it was no gentle spirit that moved him. "The boss may have some use for this guy. We'll keep him around until we get orders."

Red scowled, but didn't argue. His partner scooped beans and bacon onto a tin plate and with a cup of ink-black coffee in the other hand slouched over to where Rod lay bound with his back propped against a granite boulder. He set the food down on the ground nearby.

"Aren't you going to untie me?" Rod demanded.

"You can manage," he grunted, and went back to the fire. Rod shrugged. His arms were fastened to his sides, the hands tied together in front of him and the rope running between his legs to the ankles that were doubled up behind his body. But by rolling sidewards on the hard ground he could just manage to get to the food in the tin plate and work with the fork to shovel some of it into his mouth. The coffee, however, was a problem.

His head still ached. He had not recovered consciousness until after daylight. He had only a vague idea where he was —in the hills above Gold Gulch, he thought. The camp itself was a rudimentary affair, with a leanto of pine boughs that had been thrown together as shelter for a supply of food and equipment.

"I sent him to bring the horses," Red answered. "It's time we were riding."

"Hell, yes!"

Now there was a sound of shod hoofs scuffing the pine needles, and Chip Dugan shuffled into the camp site leading a pair of saddled horses. As he passed Rod their eyes met. Chip looked away quickly. He could not meet the hard stare the prisoner gave him, now that Rod had discovered at last the traitor to Halleck Lines.

Red and Yuma swung into their saddles. Red called back last instructions.

"Keep close watch on this bird, and plug him if he gives you trouble. We'll be back before nightfall with word from the boss what to do with him and with the stuff from the safe. Wait for us!"

"Okay," Chip answered, but his tone was surly. He stood spreadlegged beside the dying fire and watched them ride away, Red favoring his hurt arm. When the pair had disappeared Dugan turned to the remains of the morning meal.

Rod asked: "What are you for this outfit—chief flunky and dishwasher?"

He saw Dugan stiffen; then slowly the man came around and for the first time faced Rod squarely. There was a look of hatred in his pinched features. "You keep quiet!" His voice was whining. "It won't do you any good to get me sore!"

He had a six-gun tucked into the waistband of his trousers, and his skinny hand hung suggestively near it.

"Maybe not," Rod admitted. "Looks like you got the whip, right now. How much is Bill Johns paying you for double-crossing Halleck?"

Chip did not bat an eye. "Keep your guesses to yourself, I ain't answering no questions."

"No, I guess not. You're cannier than I figured, Chip. You did a good piece of acting yesterday when your friends held us up. I'd never dreamed it was you tipped them off about that shipment—or that you slipped the knots while my back was turned, and let them escape after I had the pair of them tied up."

Dugan only grunted and turned away.

Rod lay for awhile watching him. The sun came down strongly, baking the hard earth and bringing the sweat out upon his cramped body. He had lost his hat. There was no protection from the glare.

He had found the missing link between Bill Johns' gunslingers and Halleck Lines. Whatever the Gold Gulch saloon-keeper had had to pay Chip for his information, the return on the investment would be good enough. From where he lay Rod could see the big rock at whose base that box of stolen treasure now lay buried.

The knowledge of what its loss would mean to old Halleck—and especially to Halleck's daughter—made Benton forget the danger to himself; made him fight futilely against the ropes that held him prisoner.

CHIP DUGAN, chores finished, had settled down against a stump some yards away to enjoy a smoke. An hour

had passed since the two gunslingers left camp.

Rod was uncomfortable. Cramps had begun forming in his muscles. He tried at first to move enough to ease the strain, but the manner in which he was bound made that impossible. Before long his very efforts were enough to send waves of agony through his pinioned limbs.

Rod Benton took the torment as long as he could stand it, but finally it tore an exclamation from tight lips. "Are you going to leave me tied like this forever?" he grunted. "Have a heart, man!"

Chip looked around, a sardonic expression on him. "I'd be likely to turn you loose—now, wouldn't I?"

"Just fix this rope so I can stretch my legs out a little. At least you can do that!"

The man's mouth twisted crookedly, but he must have seen from the look of Benton, and the sweat streaking his tight features, that the prisoner was in real pain. For he got up presently, slouched over to stand gazing at him, frowning. And then he leaned, to test the rope that bound Rod's arms.

Benton saw his chance. The butt of the gun, thrust into Dugan's waistband, was only inches from Rod's bound fingers. He lunged forward, got both hands around the wooden grips. Chip gave a yell, tumbled back, clawing at the weapon, trying to strike the prisoner's hands away.

A wild sweep of Chip's hand caught the gun's hammer just as Benton jerked it free. There was the sharp report of the explosion, muffled by the swamper's body; and then Rod was sinking back to the ground, clutching the smoking gun.

Agony twisted Dugan's features. Bony fingers clutching at his middle, he toppled and rolled over upon his face. He lay like that, screaming. It seemed an eternity before he died.

For a long time after it was all over, Rod lay bound and helpless beside the gutshot body and was sick. Finally he tossed aside the weapon, and began crawling toward Dugan, inching his way painfully across the hard earth. He had to get rid of these confining ropes.

Dugan had a knife in his pocket. Rod had trouble getting at it, bound as he was, but touching the bloody corpse gingerly he managed to snake it out, to work the blade open, and—after a great deal of effort—cut the rope. When he finally kicked free of the last knot and climbed to his feet, the flow of the blood once more into his cramped limbs and muscles was painful.

He reloaded Dugan's gun and shoved it into his holster. In the leanto he discovered a short-handled spade and, going into the trees at the head of the slope, took time to scoop out a shallow grave. It seemed the only decent thing to do.

When Chip Dugan had been taken care of, the sun was high toward noon and Rod was anxious to be on the trail; but there was still another matter to tend to. He knew where the loot from the Halleck Stage office at Wing had been buried, and he quickly dug up the metal box. He could not be hampered by its weight, so he simply moved it several yards to the base of a blasted pine tree, and there he buried the box and spread pine needles across the place, to disguise it. He also closed over the former hiding place, as a final precaution; made it look as though nothing had been disturbed.

After that he went for Dugan's horse, picketed among the trees upslope in a spot of thin green graze, and he piled on the dead man's blanket and saddle. The horse was a hammerheaded bay from the Halleck stable in Wing. It took a buck or two at the sky as Rod's weight came into the kak; but that satisfied it and then it settled down as Rod picked a course away from this camp, and in a direction he thought would take him down to Gold Gulch. He rode calmly, but soberly. It was time to have it out with Bill Johns.

IV

TIRED as she was, Martha Halleck found that after Kirby took her home that night she was somehow too keyed-up for sleep. She undressed, and sat at the window. It was a second-story room; she could look out across the moonlit roofs of Wing, and hear the fiddles the Odd Fellows' Hall as the music filled the night

She was worried about the holdup that Rod Benton had reported. She wondered why Kirby Short was so sure Benton was lying; why, she asked herself again, would he have invented such a story? It distressed her to see two men whom she liked

as well as these at sword's points.

A horseman came along the deserted street beneath her window, the bronc's cantering hoofs echoing hollowly on the quiet night. The man reined in, came down from saddle before her own door. She saw then that it was Kirby.

Martha was alone in the house. Quickly she slipped into a robe, hurried downstairs as Kirby's knock sounded. She found a lamp, lighted it and took it in to set on a table in the hallway while she opened the door.

The look on Kirby Short's face, as the lamplight showed it, was enough to make her catch her breath. "Kirby?"

"It's trouble, Martha!" He hesitated, frowning. "It's—well, it's your father. I just got word from Gold Gulch that he's been hurt."

"Hurt?"

"I'm afraid it's pretty serious. That's why I came to tell you."

She stepped back and Kirby entered.

"What happened, Kirby? Tell me!"

"I think they've gone crazy up there!" he blurted. "Some men who don't like your father started a riot. They raided the warehouse, and—he was shot!"

"Oh!" She put a hand against the table to steady herself; the lamp flickered in a breeze from the open door. She exclaimed: "I'll get dressed at once! I must go to him!"

He nodded. "All right, Martha. I'll take you there. I don't like you going into that camp, but your father has been asking for you."

He waited below while she hurried to her room and, with fumbling fingers, got into her riding clothes. The face that looked back from her mirror, as she drew on her hat and pushed brown curls up below the brim of it, was strained and pale. And when she came downstairs again she could read the sympathy in Kirby's eyes. "Please don't worry, Martha! Surely everything will be all right."

They walked quickly to the stables. They had not gone a dozen steps when the sound of a muzzled explosion broke upon the night.

"What was that?" Martha exclaimed; and then the man and the girl were staring at each other in the darkness, both apparently struck by the same dire thought.

Kirby spoke: "Sounded like it came from straight ahead. Maybe from—"

They hurried on. When they came through the tall gate in the wagon-yard fence, they found the light before the stable door extinguished; but the moon brought out the shapes and contours of the yard and it showed the door of the office standing wide open.

Kirby headed for it at a run the girl following. She saw Kirby approach the door cautiously, then disappear inside. A match flared. When Martha reached the opening Kirby was turning up the wick of the lamp on the desk. Looking past him she saw at once the iron box safe, its door half blown off its hinges. The acrid fumes of the dynamite still hung heavy in the still air.

A gasp broke from the white lips of the girl. Kirby was already at the safe; he straightened, his face set and hard. "Cleaned out!" he gritted. "That box of dust and money!" A gun slipping into his hand, he turned quickly to the open window, then left it and went past Martha and through the door, at a run. Alone, she stood listening to the pounding of her own heart, and the noise Kirby made as he went around the building. She could hear voices in the town, too; men coming to investigate the explosion.

The first of the arrivals met Kirby as he came back toward the office. To their excited questions he answered curtly: "Someone blew up the safe—had horses waiting out back and were gone by the time Miss Halleck and I got here just a few minutes after it happened."

"Get away with much?" someone demanded.

"Plenty!"

Martha's heel touched something yielding and she glanced down to see what it was. She was straightening with a man's flat-topped, wide-brimmed hat in her hands as Kirby and two others came into the room. Kirby still carried the gun he had drawn. "No luck!" he reported; and repeated what she had heard him say outside. "They've got a good start, and trying to find the trail by moonlight—" For the first time he saw her expression, saw the object at which the girl was staring. "What have you got there?"

She raised her head, looked at them all

without being able to speak for a moment. "I—found it here on the floor by the desk. It's—"

Kirby took the sweat-stained sombrero from her, frowning. He turned it over, slowly. Inside were two initials: "R. B."

Kirby repeated them, blankly. Suddenly his face darkened. "Why, damn it all! This is the lid Benton was wearing tonight! Isn't it, Martha?"

She could only exclaim: "It—it doesn't make sense!"

"It's just beginning to make sense, you mean!" he retorted. " We know now at least why Benton invented that yarn about the hairlipped gent and the red-head—the pair that was supposed to have held him up."

"You—don't think—"

"What else am I supposed to think?" Kirby answered. "The man comes back from gold-hunting, his pockets empty. He finds the job he had his eye on already taken. So he tells a phony about a hold-up attempt, so that when he makes off with your dad's money we'll have someone to suspect besides him. Pretty clever!" Kirby slapped the brim of the hat with one strong-knuckled hand. "But this gives him away!"

A shout came from the stable at that moment. Someone yelled: "There's a dead man out here! The stableman—his head's bashed in . . ."

"Murder!" Kirby bit out the word. "That finishes the count against him!" He whirled on the men who had followed him into the room. "You boys get the sheriff, will you, and start him on Benton's trail! Tell him Miss Halleck and I have got to be leaving. If he wants us, we're on our way to Gold Gulch."

As they voiced agreement and hurried away, Kirby turned back to the girl. She stood as though in a trance, numbed by the shock of all that was happening; he put a hand upon her arm, gently. "Please, Martha!" he murmured. "Try to get ahold of yourself. We have to ride . . ."

THE horror that consumed her did not relax its grip; she moved almost automatically as Kirby helped her to mount the horse he had saddled and brought for her from the company stable. The killing of the old barnman was the final straw—the last item needed after the rest of this night's events. In the swirling confusion of her thoughts, she took the reins Kirby handed up to her and put her bronc alongside his big gray gelding.

Kirby tried to talk to her, to bring her out of the mood that gripped her. She would not even answer, and at length he gave it up and left her to herself, in silence. The thought of her father, wounded or maybe worse by now; robbery, and murder—all these seethed within her. And among them rose the picture of Rod Benton. It was incredible. And yet—

They pushed their horses steadily, mounting with the slant of the trail into barren foothills with the higher timbered peaks blocking out the stars ahead. Hours dragged to the clop of hoofbeats, the sough of the night wind in clumps of juniper and pine. Frequently they would pass the camps of boomers who had stopped beside the trail, on their way in to Gold Gulch's roaring strike.

A white moon tilted westward, dropped at least below the jagged edge of the hill, but by then the gray of dawn was already in the sky, and the terrain of rock and brush could be faintly discerned in its strengthening light. Kirby Short reined in close to the girl's side, put out a hand to touch her wrist. "Don't you want to rest a little?" he asked, concern in his voice. "We've been going it pretty hard, and you've had no sleep. That, on top of everything—"

She shook her head, managed to smile a little wanly. "You're very considerate. No, I couldn't rest, wondering about my father. I want to be with him."

"Of course," he agreed.

They rode on into the new day. They had good horses under them, that stood up well under the long climb. The sun appeared, gilding the leaves of brush and tree and burnishing the weathered rock surfaces; and the chill of the night gave way now to the warm touch of the sun.

They were only about an hour out of Gold Gulch when it happened.

At one point the trail—deserted here—dipped into a hollow where it threaded a picket of mountain alder, then climbed over barren granite rock again. The man and the girl went down into this, nothing there

to give them warning until in the very shadow of the trees a turn of the trail brought them face to face with two strange riders.

Both were masked, and they had guns in their hands that made the two draw rein, quickly. Martha heard Kirby's grunt of angry surprise; saw him start a move for the weapon in his own holster, only to have a curt warning from one of the masked men stop him. "Get those hands up, brother—real high! That's better!"

The eyes, which were all that could be seen of his face above the handkerchief he used for a mask, swiveled toward Martha and surveyed her briefly, with a glance that raked her from head to foot approvingly. The man's voice had an odd burr in it. "This is the Halleck filly, I imagine."

Martha's tone was firm as she answered: "I am Martha Halleck!"

"Good! We been waiting a spell for you—reckoned the word about your old man would fetch you along. We'll take charge of you, now."

"What is this?" Kirby exploded.

The other masked man said: "You shut up!" Looking at him closely for the first time, Martha saw that this one—smaller and thinner than his partner—had one arm in a crude sling, the coat sleeve riding empty above it. It was his right arm, and the left hand holding his six-shooter did so awkwardly.

"Hold on a second!" The one with the thick voice was eyeing Kirby interestedly. "What's your name, Pretty Face?" What do you do for a living?"

Kirby glowered at him. "If it's any of your business," he growled, "I'm Wing branch manager for Halleck."

"Oh?" The man nodded with pleasure. "A real business man—just the boy we want to see! You get back there to town," he ordered then, on a changed tone, "and see how quick you can raise fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thous— What nonsense are you talking?"

The other chuckled. "Ransom, of course. That's how much it'll cost the company if they ever want this dolly to be seen alive again!" And with that he kneed his bronc forward; reached with free hand to seize the reins from the girl's fingers.

The man holding that gun was at a disadvantage with his one bad arm, a fact which Kirby counted on. He made a sudden lunge, propelled himself out of the saddle and straight at the masked gunman. An arm hooked around the man's neck and then his weight was hauling him, backwards, across his pony's rump. They lit with Kirby on top. A squawk of pain broke from the gunman and the shapeless hat fell away, revealing a shock of brick-red hair.

The second hombre gave a startled curse. He brought his gun up but it would have been impossible to get in a shot without risking his partner's life; and then Martha Halleck had reached and clamped both hands around his gunwrist, and they were struggling for the weapon. He cursed at her, lurched to free his arm and all but dragged her from the saddle. He broke her hold but the next moment the girl's clawing fingers caught in the handkerchief tied over his face and jerked it away. The mouth was disfigured by an ugly hair-lip.

"Drop that gun!" Kirby's voice cut sharply above all other sounds. He stood in swirling dust above the red-head's prone figure, and his own weapon was leveled. The mounted man's head swiveled toward him; then, scowling, he opened his hand and let the gun plop into the road. Hands raised, he sat and glared at Short.

The red-head was stirring, shaking his hanging head, as he slowly worked back to his feet. Kirby Short told him: "Get in the saddle and ride, while I'm in a mood to let you! And if I ever see either of you again, it'll be through powder-smoke!"

Neither of the pair said anything. Kirby watched them ride out of sight.

As the last hoofbeat died and the wash of a wind through alder branches took over the silence, Martha stepped down from saddle. A reaction had set in. She found herself trembling now and so weak that she had to lean against the flank of her horse a moment while her legs steadied under her.

Kirby was at her side and his arms came around her, strong and comforting. Gratefully she accepted their protection. "Did he hurt you, Martha?" he demanded.

"No, Kirby. I was afraid for you."

"Oh, my darling!" His arms tight-

ened; his cheek was on her hair, his voice rich with feeling. "Why can't it be like this always? I want to protect you—to stand between you and the world. You need me, now! What if your father—"

She had hardly heard him, for realization of a very important fact swept through her suddenly. She stepped back and he released her, the words failing on his lips as he saw her intense expression.

"Kirby!" she exclaimed. "Those men—they're the ones Rod told us about! They fit the description he gave, exactly. Then he wasn't lying, Kirby; he *wasn't!* And I don't think he robbed the safe either. There must be some other explanation!"

In her joy and relief she failed to see the hurt and angry look that crossed Kirby's face; and then a mask dropped across Kirby's eyes and his voice when he spoke again was carefully controlled, devoid of any emotion.

"We'd better be riding, Miss Halleck."

He handed her up into the saddle, and she waited while he caught his own bronc and fell in at her side. The morning was well advanced; the day seemed beautiful to her now, and the terrible thing that had nearly befallen her was as nothing compared to the happiness in her new-found faith in Rod.

Kirby had fallen into a moody silence, which he only broke a time or two in the rest of the ride to Gold Gulch. The last few miles they began to buck heavy traffic, as men broke camp with the day's coming and took again to the trail. The outward tide was swelled now; those few hopefuls still trickling into the busted camp had to breast a strong current of the disillusioned, bound to get away from that place as quickly as possible. Martha's face grew more solemn as she saw the faces, the bleak looks of those disappointed men.

And then they took the last steep stretch, and the camp itself opened before them.

V

IMMEDIATELY they were aware of an intense excitement gripping the town. As they pushed through the crowded streets men went running past them, and there were yells and shouts and some attraction was drawing the men of this camp toward one certain point, like filings to a magnet. Martha's face was white as she turned to Kirby. "What's going on?"

"Look's like the top's blown off!" He reined over to the sidewalk, caught one man's attention and held him there talking for a moment, while running feet pounding by them raised a thin white film of dust.

"Trouble down at the freight yard," his informant said. "There was a flare-up last night, but it petered out after old man Halleck stopped a bullet. Looks like it's started again now. Bill Johns has been talking pretty strong—"

"Come on!" Kirby told the girl. They drove their broncs down the crowded throat of the street, with men yelling and tumbling out of the way of the flying hoofs. Thus they came in sight of the big warehouse, across the wide street from Bill Johns' Nugget Bar. A mob was growing here; already a cluster of shouting men had formed in front of the freight office, and others were swelling its ranks.

Up on the steps before the mercantile Vickers, the clerk, was facing the mob and trying to make himself heard above its yells. A huge gun and belt wrapped around his skinny waist made him look ridiculous; he still wore his pink sleeve bands, and sweat streaked his face and he was plainly scared to death. Yet he was doing his best to stand off the crowd.

"Haven't you done enough?" he begged them. "Mr. Halleck is lying inside there, between life and death, from the bullet one of you put into him last night. If you don't let him alone you'll kill him. Please!"

The voice of Bill Johns bawled out, drowning his words. "This is just a stall! Get the old thief out here! We're gonna hear from his own mouth how he rigged a phony gold rush at this camp and cleaned a fortune out of the rest of us. We're not gonna be played for suckers any longer!"

Someone shouted: "If he won't come out we'll burn him out! Light a torch!"

"No!" another voice protested, frantically. "There's money in that building, that belong to us. We got to get that first—"

"There's Halleck!"

A sudden hush dropped over the mob as the door behind Vickers swung open and Jonathan Halleck himself stumbled across the threshold dragging a heavy shotgun after him. He was so weak he had to put his back against the wall for support, and he stood like that, his old eyes flashing fire as he looked out at his accusers. A bloody rag was tied about his gray head, and the face beneath was white as a sheet.

Sight of her father dragged a sob from Martha Halleck, and next moment she was digging in the spurs. Kirby cried: "Don't, Martha! Don't get into this!" He caught her reins, dragging the bronc around in a dust-raising curvet. But the girl simply leaped down from saddle and went running into the crowd. They stood shoulder to shoulder; she sobbed, and fought and dug her way through the unyielding press of men.

Jonathan Halleck was speaking, his voice clear and dripping with scorn. "If any of you scum want to take another shot at me, here I am! But I'll never admit to the lie you want to put in my mouth! I'm not to blame if you went crazy looking for gold that wasn't there. If this boom was rigged I deny that I had anything to do with it!"

"We think otherwise!" Johns bawled above the crowd.

Halleck whipped around toward the voice. "I'll face you man to man, Bill Johns!" he cried, voice trembling. "It's you that's sent this mob against me! If you're not too big a coward, I'll meet you in the dust and settle my score with you —bullet for bullet!"

He started forward, bringing the heavy shotgun into line. The effort was too much. Two faltering steps he took—and then collapsed and plunged face forward on the porch!

A cry went up from the mob; it broke into a quick medley of confusion as a horseman suddenly appeared from nowhere and sent his bronc plunging into the men. They cursed him and they shouted at him, but they scrambled out of the way and he plowed through them like a ship through heavy seas. And then he had reached the steps and he leaped down there, where Vickers was kneeling beside Halleck and trying to help him to a sitting position. The rider turned on the mob then. It was Rod Benton.

"Hold on," he cried, "before you do something you'll be sorry for later. Listen to me a minute! Neither Halleck nor anyone else rigged this strike—because it's not a phony. There *is* gold here! Plenty of it."

A voice yelled: "Who're you trying to fool?"

Benton swung, threw out a pointing arm. "Tell them, Nick!"

And turning, they saw a sunbitten, leather-tough old man standing in the stirrups of his mule's saddle. Nick Catlett's arms were thrust skyward, and the sun picked out a sparkle of brilliance in the rocks his gnarled hands held triumphantly aloft. "Picture rock!" he chortled, voice trembling. "I've struck it—rich! It's lyin' all over the ground!"

"Another frameup!" Johns snorted.

"Go see for yourself!" Nick retorted. "Trouble with you amateur gold-hunters, you don't look far enough. A hell of a flood thundered down this gulch once and brought a few scraps of this rock with it. You've all seen those samples and handled them—chunks of ore shot through with wire gold! But you wouldn't climb way up into the hills—way up behind Sugarloaf—to find the field where the stuff came from!

"I've recorded my claim. Anybody wants a look at it, come along!"

Suddenly that crowd broke into its separate units. Men pressing in around Nick Catlett; men rushing for mules and horses to take the trail themselves. Johns and his friends shouted against them, trying to hold them with warnings of trickery but the mob melted away. Finally, with a curse, Johns stalked back to his saloon.

ROD turned to Halleck. Martha had reached her father now and was kneeling beside him, cradling his bloody head against her, crying. Glancing at Vickers, Rod said bruskly: "Let's get him inside. Fast!"

They placed the hurt man on a cot in the storeroom, where he had spent the night with the faithful Vickers watching over him. Old Jonathan had regained consciousness; he lay there and his eyes were sharp and bright. "Is this true?" he de-

manded. "Have they really made a strike?"

"Old Nick Catlett," Rod told him. "I sold him my outfit for ten dollars—and he went right up in the hills and read the sign the rest of us didn't have eyes to see. It means new life for Gold Gulch. And more business for Halleck Lines. You'll be able to clear those notes. And there's still the money I took out for you—"

Martha was on her feet, consternation in her. "Oh, you didn't know, Rod! The safe in the office at Wing was blown—all that money taken!"

"It's all right," he assured her. "Those same two gun-slingers that held me up did that. But I got the money back!"

"Just like that he says it," Halleck grunted. "As though it wasn't nothing!" He glanced at Rod, sharply. "But I suppose you're going gold hunting again?"

Rod answered: "I suppose I am." And when he saw the hurt look in Martha's eyes: "I don't want to—I've had my fill of chasing rainbows. But I went and lost the job I'd rather have."

"You mean the Wing managership?" Jonathan Halleck shrugged. "I said if you came through for me, I'd find you a job—and this is it! I'll put you in charge here at Gold Gulch. A tough camp like this ought to be right down your alley. After that—" He glanced keenly at his daughter, saw the happiness in her eyes. He permitted a brief smile to touch his chiseled mouth. "I'm getting a little peaked, I guess—took this bullet swipe along my skull to show me I ain't as young as I used to be. About time I started grooming someone to take over the whole organization!"

Rod felt Martha's arms suddenly around him, and knew that she was crying with joy. He tilted her brown head back, looked at her a long moment. "Is that how you'd like it to be, Martha?" And then she was breathing, "Oh, yes, Rod!" and he was kissing her.

As he let her go he looked past her and saw Kirby Short in the doorway. Kirby was holding to the sill with a hand that was tight and white across the knuckles, and there was a look of hatred and black jealousy in Kirby's handsome face. He whirled suddenly, and was gone again. Rod forgot him as Halleck spoke.

"I guess it's settled then. You take over here as of right now and Vickers will give you any help you need."

"All right." Suddenly Rod's face had gone hard, as he remembered. "There's one first job I have to handle my own way. I'll start with that!"

Martha caught his arm as he turned toward the door. "Rod—what do you mean?"

"There's a pair of gunslingers and their boss that need scratching off the slate. The two that tried twice to steal that gold and money and wreck the Halleck Lines. The two that spread lies and rumors about your father, Martha!"

She exclaimed: "They tried for ransom, too!" She told quickly about the kidnap attempt, and how Kirby had saved her. Anger was boiling deep in Rod as he heard. "That settles it!"

Her voice came after him, pleading with him not to risk himself needlessly; but he hardly heard as he went out of that gloomy building and bareheaded, in the full beat of sunlight, paced across the dust to Johns' barroom. Chip Dugan's gun was in his holster, riding low beneath the sweep of lean fingers. He moved without haste, purposefully. And when he was still yards away Johns himself came shouldering through the door of the Nugget, came to the edge of the steps and stood there.

Benton stopped, facing him. "I'm ready any time you are!"

"All right," said Johns, evenly, "if you want to have it this way. I suppose I deserve it—I've been a damn fool, the lies I've believed and the senseless way I went out of my head. But I'd like to apologize to Halleck first, if you'll let me!"

"Apologize?" Rod echoed. "For buying out Chip Dugan? For sending your gunslingers to hold up the gold shipment, blow the Wing office safe, and try to kidnap Halleck's daughter?"

"Now, wait!" Johns threw up a hand quickly, a peculiar look on his face. "You made a wrong guess! If you're talking about that killer, Yuma, he don't work for me—nor his red-headed partner, either."

"No? How come I see you so thick with them, then?"

"If you want to know—they're the ones that started me being suspicious of Halleck! They've been pumping me full of lies; and I swallowed it—"

"Go on!" muttered Benton. "Pass the buck!"

"Rod—*look!*"

BENTON whirled. It was Martha Halleck, in the door of the freight office, and she was pointing. Over at a hitching rail Kirby Short was just swinging into saddle; he leaned from there, in earnest talk with two men who stood at his bronc's head. The two were Red and Yuma. And Kirby was opening the flap of his saddle-pocket, taking out the guns he had lifted from them in the hills, passing them over to be slipped into the gunmen's waiting holsters.

Rod saw the whole picture, then. He forgot Johns. He wheeled and started for the hitchrack. Kirby glanced up, saw him—and hate twisted his face as one hand shot downward, came up with gunmetal palmed and throwing lead at Benton.

The slug went wild, whistling past Benton's head. Rod's gun slammed a shot at Kirby. It suddenly was too hot for Short and with a curse he reined away from the hitchpole. *"Stop him!"* he shouted at Red and Yuma. Short was roweling his bronc and pounding away down the dusty street, leaving the two killers to finish the fight.

Yuma was dragging up a gun. Still trying for Kirby, Benton sent another bullet after him but the slug was lost; and then something struck him a sharp blow in the thigh and he crumpled into the dust.

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Through the film of pain he saw Yuma's face, and the smoke dribbling from the killer's gun. Red was struggling awkwardly, left-handedly, to get his out of leather. Jaw clamped, Rod twisted his own weapon into position and tripped the trigger. It was a snap shot, but Yuma took the bullet squarely. His head snapped backward, and then he dropped to his knees and his lifeless face struck the dirt heavily.

Someone shouted: "Hold it, red-head!"

Bill Johns was out into the street now, a sixshooter in his lean hand covering the second gunman. Handicapped by his wounded arm, that one quickly gave up and let his weapon fall to the ground at his feet; stood staring, white of face, at the saloonman's threatening gun.

On his feet again, Rod Benton staggered from the hot burn of the bullet across the leg but headed grimly toward Red. Martha came hurrying, fright and worry in her pretty face; he waved her aside, faced the gunman with six-shooter level and menacing. "Start talking!" he commanded. "You hired out your gun to Kirby Short, is that it?"

The red-head swallowed, glanced shiftily about him. "Sure," he grunted. "Why should I take the rap? Yuma and I have been following his orders all along—first, to take that box of dust whenever Chip Dugan notified us it was coming through. You crossed us up on that, so we beefed the stable tender, blew the safe, and got the gold that way. You stumbled in on us and we took you along."

"And you tried to kidnap Miss Halleck?"

Red shook his head. "Not actually. That was just a gag. Short wanted to make an impression by saving her, because he had an idea she'd be worked up about her father and everything, and he could maybe propose to her right there and wind up by marrying her and her old man's business, all at the same time. At least, that's the way he told it to us, last night in Wing when we laid our plans!"

Martha's face was drained of color.

"Well, it didn't quite work out the way he wanted it—any of it!" said Benton, grimly. "And now he knows he's lost, all the way around."

Johns put in: "But he's getting away—and after his lyin' gunslingers used me for a fool. I sure hate to see that happen!"

"Take care of this one," muttered Benton. "I think I know where to find Kirby . . ."

He rode out, the touch of Martha's last kiss rode with him, and also a cold, compelling need to settle a score.

He came at last to the cleared slope where a leanto stood beside a long-dead camp-fire, and where Chip Dugan lay buried. He reined down, came in at a walk over pine needles that muffled the sound of steelshod hoofs. He dismounted and went through the last of the trees on foot. The sound of metal glancing on rock came to him occasionally as he moved forward.

Then he was at the edge of the trees, and he stood there a moment watching Kirby Short. The man had a shovel and he was hard at work. At the base of a large, flat-faced rock he had quite a large hole dug.

Kirby straightened finally, stamped the bit of the shovel deep into the dirt and with a curse sleeved sweat from his eyes. Breathing hard, he rested like that a moment. His back was turned to Benton and he was not aware of the other's presence until Rod spoke.

"You won't find it, Kirby. I moved the box away from there."

Gravel scraped against boot leather as the man whirled. He left the shovel sticking up out of the rocky ground, and the hand that had held it was already blurring down toward holster leather. Rod waited until the last second, not wishing to take too great an advantage of surprise; wishing this to be the final showdown, and a fair fight.

Braced on his stiff, bullet-burned leg, he let his right hand drop and came up with the Colt bucking against his palm. Kirby Short, with all the chance Benton gave him, had been too fast, too hurried. The first bullet from his gun plunked into the gravel at Benton's feet. There wasn't a second one.

To the blended thunder of the guns, Kirby stiffened and then went limp, folding at the middle. He fell, knocking over the shovel that was thrust into the ground. His body hit the edge of the hole he had been digging. He rolled into it.

THE LEAD DANCE

By STEWART TOLAND

The kid wanted to prove that he wasn't all mouth; that he could act as well as talk. So he hit for the trail . . . a lone youngster, bare-handed, against an owlhoot gent with a rifle and three smoke poles. It was crazy.

THE VALLEY rolled like a vast green sea frozen in the clutch of mountains. The peaks were blue ghosts marching on the horizon with a tiny town crouched at their feet. And in the very center of the valley lay a lone rock ridge like a giant sleeping buffalo with humped back and sloping shoulders covered with a ragged mane of pine. Above, black and forbidding against the blue sky were buzzards, three of them circling round and round. Waiting. Always waiting.

The boy on the rim of the valley watched the birds, twice he tried to turn away. Only he couldn't. He sat his pony straight as any Indian, and his stomach was as flat and as empty as an Indian's in the time of famine. It had been days since he'd tasted a square meal, just the little he could catch with his hands because his gun was empty, too.

And his immediate future. Because he

was so young. He owned a man's height and a man's heart but his face and his hands and the eagerness in his eyes all belonged to a boy, and the ranchers hereabouts weren't hiring boys. They wanted men with steely eyes and two guns worn low, men who wouldn't turn yellow if they chanced to come upon the hombre who had terrified these parts for a year now, a swarthy gent with a white scar running down his chin, and the handle of Butch Hallock.

No, there was no room on the ranches for boys but in the town against the west hills there might be work and a meal. God, if he could go right this minute! Only he couldn't, not with those birds in the sky. Buzzards spelled death.

The boy flecked his pony's shoulder and turned toward the flying specks in the east. It was a long ride and lonely. The sun laid burning hands on his shoulders but he didn't turn back, he had to know what it was the buzzards were watching. He came upon it quite suddenly hidden in a stretch of prairie grass, a brown horse with balled eyes and bloated belly. It was dead. The horse wore a saddle. Spurs drew blood as the boy shot forward. A saddle meant a rider, still suffering through a tortured hell, because the birds were still waiting.

He was lying in a pitiful heap, his white hair soaked into a brownish mat frosted with flies. The hump moved as the boy drew near.

"Water!" Hope was in the word, unbelieving hope. "My God, give me water!"

And the boy had some to share, sun boiled and flat, but water.

Finally the old man leaned back. "Son, you saved my life. Those buzzards up yonder. I been watchin', couldn't hold out much longer."

"I reckon I know," blue eyes stared down compassionately. "How long you been here, old timer?"

"Since mornin', early mornin'," the blistered lips moved slowly. "I was robbed an' left for dead, my horse killed. I couldn't walk, the hombre what done it put a bullet in my knee just before he left. Reckon he wanted to make sure I'd stay put."

"What'd he look like?" The yellow head leaned forward eagerly. "Did he have a white scar runnin' across his chin?"

"If you mean was he Butch Hallock, he was, son."

Blue eyes blanked out. "Then you're lucky you're alive." He stooped low. "I'll see if I can't get you on my horse and take you to town."

"No, you don't! I couldn't stand such a long trip and besides there ain't time. With water in me I can last a good spell now an' you got to fly to town an' warn 'em. Tell 'em Hallock has two thousand dollars on him that he stole from me this morning. Tell 'em he's sure to come in an' have a spree on it.

"With every lawman in the county lookin' for him? He'd be crazy to go to town!"

"Crazy he is an' lucky as sin. Last time he was in town he killed two an' the time before he got three, he's still free. Ride like hell, hoy, an' mayhap Sheriff Mullen will be able to outsmart the devil this time."

AND ride he did, with the sand churned fine as smoke behind him, with his head low against the pony's neck and his eyes bright with the joy of a chase. He met no one, not even on the edge of town. Seen from afar Mesquite Springs wasn't much, and close up it was less. One blacksmith shop and corral, five saloons, a trading store and sheriff's office. There was a gent with a star on his chest coming out the door and though he was a man he looked more like a walrus, hunch shouldered, wrinkle cheeked and wide moustached. He barked at two hombres sprawled in the dirt against the tie rail, their sombreros low over their eyes.

"If the waddies in these parts had any ambition!"

A swirl of lather and dust pulled close. "Sheriff, Butch Hallock's on the loose!"

"Since when hasn't he been on the loose?" Sheriff Mullen had black, expressionless eyes like glazed raisins.

The boy jumped to the ground. "I mean he's got two thousand dollars he robbed a gent of this mornin' an' I was told to warn you he'd be along to spend it."

"Who told you to warn me?"

"The gent what was robbed."

"What gent would that be? Who in these parts has two thousand dollars to be stolen? Tell me that, button!"

The boy rocked back on his heels. "I don't know his name, he's a little, shrivelled

up sort of man with white hair an' I found him out on the flats. He's hurt bad but he thought he owed it to you to send me on ahead."

"So you don't know his name." The sheriff laughed and sat down on the board walk. He pulled out the makings and started rolling a brownie.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Not by a damn sight. No one's fool enough to carry two thousand dollars around these parts."

"I guess maybe you're right." The baby blue eyes lost all the boy in them and became hard as agate. "No one ought to be fool enough to even live in these parts with a sheriff that's so lazy or dumb headed he won't even listen when there's news about the hombre that has the county jumpin' at shadows! It seems to me if five of my town folk had been killed I'd do more than sit down an' smile when I heard the killer might be coming back!"

"You've got a big mouth, haven't you button?" The sheriff wasn't smiling now.

The fat gent against the tie rail had pushed his sombrero back. "He's got a gun, too."

The second waddie, lean and hungry looking beneath a carrot top drawled lazily. "I wonder if the sheriff's thinkin' of the rumor I'm thinkin' of."

"What rumor's that, Dan?"

"Why, the one about how Butch Hallock has taken on a partner, a kid with a baby face an' trigger itchy fingers."

Three pairs of eyes stared at the boy laughing in their faces. "So that's why you don't aim to believe me, you think I'm tied in with Butch Hallock. Well, I'm not an' if I was what'd be the sense of me comin' to town to warn you against my partner, fixin' it so you'd be waitin' for him when he comes? That'd be plumb crazy!"

"It might be some sort of a plan. Or you might be mad at him an' splitting."

"No. You could come back with me an' see that hurt gent for yourselves only there mightn't be time. Hallock might get here before, he's had the money now since dawn and he must be gettin' mighty interested in spendin' it." The kid leaned forward so eagerly and the three kept their sober eyes so intent on him that none of them saw the lone rider coming down the street, a swarthy gent with a scar running down his chin.

Sheriff Mullen scowled. "Button, I don't know whether to believe you or not but I can say this, no matter what your play is, get out of town! Butch Hallock isn't an hombre for kids to mess around with."

The boy laughed, as he always did when he was unsure of himself. The sheriff's words had sent little shivers up and down his spine, a sort of warning that he, too, ought to be afraid of Hallock, that he ought to get out while he could. He laughed the fear away.

"Aw shucks, Hallock can't be so much! No bad man is! He's probably like all of 'em, yella as hell an' in need of a lesson taught him."

"O.K. teacher, why don't you learn him? There ain't no time like the present." The voice came from behind, a slow, deadly, monotonous voice.

The four stood still a moment, listening to their hearts beat and when they turned they didn't go for their guns. They had all heard the waiting death.

A STRANGE hombre sat his palomino pony a few feet away. He was dressed in brown, even to a dirty neckerchief, his hair was black and so were his eyes, his skin swarthy, with a white scar running down the chin. Two six-guns hung motionless in his hands.

"Reach for the sky! An' don't make no bad moves or I'll send you there. Permanent."

Slowly the men obeyed, all except the youngest. He stood transfixed, bug-eyed. "Butch Hallock!" he breathed.

The black eyes became slits. "That's right, younker. Hand me up your gun, an' if you touch trigger I'll shoot you dead."

"My gun ain't loaded, you don't need to fear it."

"Hand it up!"

The boy glanced quickly at the men beside him, at their raised arms. He crossed over, gingerly handed up his Colt, the only thing in all the world he really loved besides his horse.

The gunman motioned him back. "You sabe my moniker," he drawled. "What's yours?"

"Sugarfoot." The blue eyes were deep, sullen.

"An' you're the one what was aimin' to teach me a lesson!" There was a pause, breathless, endless. "Well, I hankers to teach you one first." Quickly he triggered lead in a semi-circle about the small, bright, tooled boots. "Dance, Sugarfoot!" he yelled. "Dance for your life!"

Sugarfoot danced.

He danced high and wide and tried to leap behind a post. A slug ripped through his thigh, brought him up smart. The thin waddy swore, reached for his gun. It didn't quit leather. He was down, huddled in the soft earth, blood oozing from the hole between his eyes. Such a small spot of blood, like a red period to put at the end of a man's life.

Without seeming to move, the killer changed guns, kept up his steady firing. The sheriff had been counting slugs, waiting for the dull click of the hammers on empty chambers, but so had the owlhoot. With a yell of triumph he brought the palomino up, dashed around the corner, shooting as he rode.

Silence rocked the empty street. Clem Mullen and Fox Andrews removed their Stetsons, stared dully down at the body on the ground.

Heedless of the pain in his leg, Sugarfoot leaped into the saddle, wheeled his pony. The lawman jumped in front of him, blocked his way. "Where you goin', button?" he roared.

"Where any man but you yella coyotes would go, after the killer! After my gun!"

Mullen grabbed the reins, "Listen, Sugarfoot, didn't you note the rifle hangin' from his saddle? There ain' no chance goin' after that owlhoot!"

The youngster eased a bit, let the reins fall loosely over the horn.

"Yeah," Fox Andrews had picked up Dan, was holding his partner's lifeless body in his arms. "Don't you think you taught Hallock enough of a lesson for one day?"

The words lashed across Sugarfoot's face, stung bitterly, drowned out the pain in his leg. And more words lashed from the sheriff, "You was big in your talk, button, maybe you see now that talk ain't enough."

Sugarfoot swung silently and rode out of town.

Once over the rise the boy stopped, bound up his leg clumsily. Then, empty holster swinging noisily, he picked up the owlhoot's trail. Sugarfoot stared as the fresh tracks with the dust still curling in them. He wanted to turn back, there was enough fear in him for that. Yet there was also a sort of blind courage, he wanted his Colt, and more, he wanted to prove that he wasn't all mouth, that he could do as well as talk. So he followed the trail on and on. A lone younster, barehanded, against an owlhoot gent with a rifle and three smoke poles.

It was crazy.

The sun disappeared behind the valley ridge, shadows fingered over the trail, and in one of them Sugarfoot found the squashed bug. It hadn't been much of a bug in the beginning and now it was less but it saved his life.

For more than a mile Sugarfoot had been walking, leading his cayuse, trying to follow the outlaw's trail that had become increasingly difficult as the soft grassy earth turned to shale and rock strewn ledges. Sugarfoot thought he had lost it, was about to mount and ride ahead in the hope he might come across it farther on. Then he found the bug.

The bug was juicy, wet, the air had not dulled it, no ants had found it. Quickly Sugarfoot sought cover behind a rock. A faint, wet print of a boot heel had been by the bug.

No sound disturbed the late afternoon quiet. Sugarfoot left his pony ground anchored behind the rock, inched forward on his belly. Up over the ledge he went, and peered into the black eyes of Butch Hallock.

Hallock didn't see him. He was loading his guns and he was scowling, the twin cartridge belts that hung below his waist were empty and apparently he didn't even have enough to fill the repeaters. Six slugs snapped into one, two in the other.

BLUE eyes scanned the horizon. The owlhoot's cayuse was nowhere in sight, probably hidden in the clump of mesquite far over to the right. Sugarfoot grinned. For some reason Hallock had miscalculated. He had come back to wait in ambush for his tracker but he was short on ammunition, maybe he didn't even have any more in his saddle bags.

Sugarfoot crouched low behind his rock. With infinite care he reached down, picked

up a handful of small pebbles. The lobo was staring over at the clump of mesquite, pursed his lips as though to whistle. With incredible swiftness Sugarfoot skimmed a stone through the air. It landed far to the east. The outlaw whirled, three shots sang out, skipped into distance.

Blue eyes laughed. Hallock had a nervous trigger finger.

Almost before the owlhoot had time to recover from his surprise at finding no one in sight, dead or alive, another pebble landed noisily to the south. Once more the fire throwing jasper shot by ear, instead of sight.

Two more slugs were gone. Only three remained.

Another pebble whisked through the air unnoticed, clattered obligingly on rock but brought no answering fire; Butch Hallock had tumbled to the game, and crouched behind the nearest low rock, cursing.

Three slugs to go. Three more slugs.

The words sang in Sugarfoot's brain as he whipped off his shirt. His cream colored Stetson was before him, carefully shrouded against stray bullets. Carefully he bunched the bright plaid shirt sleeve, pushed it experimentally, as though a careless elbow showed. Instantly a slug ripped through it. He screamed shrilly as though in pain and hoped it sounded natural.

Two slugs to go.

Then Sugarfoot took his big chance.

Listening for the slightest sound, the youngster put his shirt back on, buttoned it up. His fingers were clumsy, his throat dry. With a wild yell he was up, leaping jerkily down the slope. Two steps and he fell, rolled behind another boulder, bruised and bleeding from a dozen cuts where sharp rock had bit deep, he sat up and grinned. He was still alive and now he and the owlhoot were almost even. Hallock was a foot taller, pounds heavier but he had no bullets and, like Sugarfoot had said he reckoned what Hallock did have was a streak of yellow running right through him to his heart.

Sugarfoot came from behind his rock, boldly, and Hallock showed himself, menacing the six-shooters, but the bluff didn't hold, the boy hunched forward, smiling. One of the guns flew from the outlaw's hands, hurtled through air. Sugarfoot ducked, came on with that same mocking grin.

Hallock didn't seem to be too worried. He glanced at the clump of mesquite and whistled, and that was when Sugarfoot made his mistake. He glanced at the mesquite, too, and before he'd seen the palomino pony dash into view Hallock had closed the gap and was wrapping his second gun on Sugarfoot's skull. The yellow head bounced to one side as the cedar butt glanced down his cheek, the blow wasn't true, the wicked force of it lost on the air. Strong, young fingers fastened about the owlhoot's neck and clawed in.

Hallock's knee came up, pressed into Sugarfoot's stomach. Hoofbeats sounded close. Neither man looked up. Insistent pain fogged the blue eyes. Sugarfoot's fingers jellied, relaxed their hold, the neck slipped away, so did the wicked knee. The hoofbeats continued, sounded louder, as a bullet whizzed through the air. The blue eyes jerked open. Hallock was a yard away jumping into his saddle. Three horsemen were galloping from the south, slinging lead as they rode. A pack horse stood abandoned, disconsolate in the rear.

Sugarfoot stared up into the angry face of Sheriff Mullen. "Go after him!" he yelled. "His guns are empty!"

As if in answer a rifle bullet sung by. The men jumped to the ground, crouched low.

"You damned idiot!" Mullen glowered. "Haven't you sense enough to keep out o' trouble?"

The blue eyes had cleared, blazed ungratefully, "You're the idiots! If you hadn't of made so much danged noise I would o' had him in another couple minutes."

"You looked like it!" Fox Andrews drawled. "With your tongue out and knees half touchin' your chin. What you need, button, is a nursemaid or keeper!"

"Go easy, Fox." Sheriff Mullen decorated the ledge with a long brown stream. "He's just a crazy kid tryin' to play at bein' big. It'd be better if you tried to keep out o' trouble till you're growed, an' sometime come an' thank us for savin' your life."

The blue eyes wavered. "I do now," he mumbled.

The sheriff turned away, looked at the sky. "It'll be gettin' dark pretty soon. Reckon we'd best be headin' on to the

ranch." He motioned toward the third member of the party, "You best go back for Dan. We'll wait for you."

In a few minutes the pack horse came up with its grisly burden and the silent group moved on.

Sugarfoot watched them go then retraced his steps in search of his pony. The squashed bug lay where it had been only now a column of ants busied about it. Grimly the small boot lifted, ground it into the rock. After that Sugarfoot searched the sky for buzzards. They were still there, flying endlessly. And when he'd ridden until they weren't specks any more but pointed wings and craning, naked necks he found the old man waiting patiently below.

The gent swore some at Sugarfoot's story. "If I'd only thought to tell my name or write you a note then maybe the sheriff would have believed you in time," he sighed. "Well, it's too late now. For everything."

SOMEHOW Sugarfoot got the wounded man on his horse, somehow he lived through the interminable distance. Lights were on in the ranch-house, a Chinese cook waiting at the door of the Lazy Q.

The ill man didn't complain when the cook cleaned his wounds but afterwards he lay very still, scarcely breathing, utterly exhausted. Sugarfoot ate dinner beside the bed, gradually became aware of the other's steady gaze.

"You're a stranger here, younker?" he queried.

"Been here a week. Tryin' to git work."

"Found any?"

"No."

"I'd sure like to give you some, but I can't." The blood-shot eyes filled with water. "I ain't got none to give."

"I'd do anythin', chop wood, put up fence, punch cows—anything!" The blue eyes blinked hopefully. "I need a job bad."

"You don't understand. I ain't got work to give. I ain't got work myself."

"But you said this ranch was yours!"

"It was, son. I got a note for two thousand dollars comin' due tomorrow. Butch Hallock got that money from me this mornin'. I ain't got no more."

For a long while they sat in silence.

The older man broke it, lying white and still in the light of the kerosene lamp. "You ain't asked me but my name's Bill Quade. What's yours?"

"Sugarfoot."

Sugarfoot reached for the lamp. "I reckon you ought to be gettin' sleep. Them slugs tore you up some." He hesitated, licked dry lips. "Could I borrow your guns, Mr. Quade?"

"You could, Sugarfoot, 'cept I ain't got none. Hallock has mine." His eyes strayed toward the barred door, "An' there ain't a puncher in the bunkhouse. Every danged one's out on the range, not due home for two, three days."

Sugarfoot lowered the wick, blew out the flame. "You ain't got no other weapons?"

Bill Quade thought a moment, his eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness, picking out the lithe, tense figure above him. "Nothin' 'cept a carvin' knife ten mile long which I doubt whether Lee Hung would part with, an' a couple sticks o' dynamite."

"Can I have the dynamite?"

"I reckon so. Whatcha aimin' to do with it?"

"I aim to get Butch Hallock!"

Dawn found Sugarfoot in the valley again heading toward the cedar-clustered ridge. Two sticks of dynamite and a length of fuse stuck from under his belt.

He'd lain awake long hours figuring what to do. He knew he couldn't just wander around aimlessly and expect to find the outlaw. He'd more likely find a bullet in the heart, shot from ambush. There was no sense in tracking, the lobo's trail had surely been obliterated by this time. The smart thing for him to do he figured was to climb to the top of the ridge that divided the vast valley. From there he could see for miles. He could stay there watching and waiting for a sign of camp smoke or a rider heading for town.

Butch Hallock had two thousand dollars in his saddle bags and he hadn't had a chance to get drunk on it yet. He might also need ammunition depending on how much he had cached away. Anyway Sugarfoot reckoned he wouldn't wait very long before heading for the Springs and when he did go he had to come in sight of the ridge.

The ascent was steep, a sort of devil's nightmare of rocky ground. Half way up, Sugarfoot grounded his pony in a small wooded basin. It wouldn't be so difficult getting just his slight body through the dense undergrowth and the horse wouldn't help him any on the crest of the ridge.

HE was almost to the top when he first heard the sound of running water. It was a sweet, cooling promise and Sugarfoot hurried on, his slim body slipping ghost-like between the trees, his feet making no sound on the needle-packed earth.

The gurgling became louder, more insistent. Sugarfoot left the ridge top, searched along the steep slope. Ahead he saw the black maw of a cave, rock rimmed, with streamers of vine curtaining the entrance. The sound of water was louder. Sugarfoot turned toward the cave, stepped in the entrance, then froze.

A man crouched in the center over a small fire. A man all dressed in brown with a dirty neckerchief at his throat. The startled blue eyes searched the cave, rested on the blankets, the saddle, cooking utensils. Butch Hallock did live near Mesquite Springs and Sugarfoot knew where.

Slowly he backed out, his heart beating furiously, it seemed as though the outlaw must hear its wild tattoo. But he didn't hear, and he didn't turn around, and Sugarfoot crept away unnoticed. The boy slid through the trees, headed the few feet up and over the crest of the ridge in search of the other entrance to the cave. That there was one he was sure. The small camp-fire had been burning briskly yet the cave had not been smoke hazed. A hole, big or small, to afford a draft must be at the other end or in the roof.

Smoke-stained, greasy leaves led him to the clump of bushes that completely blocked the entrance. This entrance was as large as the other, made of the cave not a cave but a high vaulted corridor of stone under the ridge top. A palomino horse stood tethered in his corner of the chamber, his nose in a small spring.

Sugarfoot moved down the slope, out of sight. He knew he could ride to town, get a posse, but that would mean shooting and men dying, and in the end he would get no credit. There was too much pride in him for that, he wanted to stop the sneers on the faces of the hombres of Mesquite Springs, he wanted to bring Butch Hallock in alive, singlehanded.

So easy to want. So hard to do.

Sugarfoot fingered the long sticks of dynamite; he caressed them as though they were alive, he studied them as though he'd never seen dynamite before. And then he smiled. Deft fingers cut the fuse in half, spliced it. Afterwards he crawled close to the spring end of the cave, with a mountain of rock above the entrance and on either side, a mountain of rock waiting for a Mohammed to move it,

Minutes later Sugarfoot once again climbed the ridge, sprawled belly down above the black, vine-strewn opening of the rock chamber. One stick of dynamite remained in his fist and he wedged it between two rocks, trailed a long fuse through the underbrush and curved it back again. That done he lighted a stub of candle and held it safe in his cupped hands.

Then it came. A deafening, thunderous roar followed by a scream, shrill, piercing. Butch Hallock dashed out of the dust-filled cave below Sugarfoot, guns in hand, eyes searching the countryside wildly.

The youngster lowered his head, peered between the two rocks he'd hidden behind. "Drop your guns, Hallock!"

Two slugs ripped harmlessly over him.

"I said shed your hardware, owlhoot, before I drop another hunk o' dynamite an' let go the whole side o' the mountain."

The owlhoot stood poised, hesitant. Plunging hoofbeats could be heard from inside the corridor now closed up at the spring end as the spooked palomino tried to tear himself free.

Seconds passed. "I'm waitin', Hallock," Sugarfoot warned. He stooped to the fuse lying long and white and deadly in the grass, held the candle close. "Listen. Hallock. Listen careful and hear the fuse sputter. That's your life, Hallock, sputtering straight an' fast to hell.

"The fuse is hid so you can't shoot it out. Don't bother to look. Just listen an' die, or drop them guns."

Reluctantly the lobo's gnarled fingers opened, closed emptily. Rage purpled his face, made the white scar stand out boldly, nastily.

"Now walk to yonder pine, the tall one." The blue eyes watched narrowly as the outlaw shuffled backwards. Candle smoke flicked up at him, tightened his nostrils. "Now turn around, hug the tree an' don't you leave go till I tells you you can."

Hallock cursed, made no move.

"I said hug it!" There was something in Sugarfoot's voice, something cold, impersonal that made the outlaw obey. There was also that small, sputtering fuse.

Needles scratched Hallock's eyes as he hugged the rough bark, but it was only for a second. The owlhoot roared, his hand snaked to his left armpit, cut a hide-out weapon from a shoulder holster. Sugarfoot crashed to the ground. Slugs fanned his shirt as he got behind a protecting tree. One caught him, creased along his ribs. Burned. He screamed, started to fall over a rock ridge. The lobo grinned, raced toward the crest of the hill to the dynamite hid behind the twin rocks. About half an inch remained of the fuse.

Sugarfoot scrambled to safety, his fingers closed over a small round rock, just about the size of a baseball it was, and twice as hard. He stood, wound up, and pitched. Hallock pulled out the fuse just as the flying missle smacked him on the temple. Without a sound he crashed to the ground and lay still.

Heedless of the blood soaking his clothes Sugarfoot danced up the slope. "Thanks," he murmured through crooked lips, "for dousin' the fuse. I wasn't countin' too much on my fists an' rock but I was aimin' to send you to hell if I had to go all the way with you."

IT was high noon of a Saturday and a goodly bunch of men were roaming the one street of the Springs. Sugarfoot, face flushed, lips tight and eyes bright with pride rode straight and tall as he broke into the milling throng. Well filled holsters jutted up and back from his blood stained hips. In his hand nestled the lead rope to a palomino pony trailing to the side and a little behind. Ignominiously slung across the saddle, hands and feet tied under the horse's belly, head bobbing and bright with rage, was Butch Hallock, killer. Butch Hallock, captured.

The street stilled. All noise ceased, each man stood open mouthed, rooted to the spot. Sugarfoot stopped in front of the sheriff's office. A poster gleamed brightly in the sunlight. "Five hundred dollars reward for Butch Hallock, dead or alive." Deliberately the youngster drew his Colt, triggered point blank between the mocking eyes in the picture.

There was the crash of a chair, an oath and Sheriff Mullen bounded to the door, guns out. "Well, I'll be damned!" Mullen found his voice, spit a stream of juice over the wooden sidewalk. "Whereat did you find him?"

"I caught the coyote in his hole." The red lips curled. "An' he showed yella just like I knowed he would."

Men crowded around, cut the rope under the horse's belly, let the owlhoot crash to the ground, and how they screamed with joy when he cursed! Fear blinded his eyes as they yanked him up, foam flecked water drooled from his mouth, coursed down the blood stained scar, but there was no pity in anyone, no chance to escape.

Sugarfoot reached inside his shirt, pulled out a sheaf of stained bills. "This," he drawled, "is to pay off the mortgage on the Lazy Q. I reckon you know to who it goes. Bill Quade ain't feelin' so good, so I'm makin' delivery for him."

Mullen took the pack, pocketed it dumbly.

Once again Sugarfoot's hand splayed over his Colt. A slug whined into the earth an inch from the owlhoot's boot tip. "You taught me to dance to lead, Hallock, now let me return the favor." The blue eyes sparkled. "Dance! I aim to teach you how before they string you up."

Ankles lashed tightly, hands behind his back, Butch Hallock jumped and whirled and the crowd shrieked with joy. As suddenly as the slugs began, they ended. Sugarfoot leaned to the sheriff.

"You can send the reward money to the Lazy Q," he murmured softly. "There's a job waiting for me there, because I took time out to help a man when he was hurt, because when nobody would help me—I helped myself."

LONGHORN PUZZLE

By TOM O'NEILL

An unbranded critter belongs to any man strong enough to take him. . . . *Or any woman.*

MRS. VENTER'S eyes were dry. Her voice stayed soft and low. But Joey Venter knew how she felt inside. He felt the same way—smouldering.

They were down near the corral, the corral Beth Venter and her boy had built themselves. Defiantly, mother and son were facing three rough looking men.

The bulky one was named Will Teemling. He owned a spread over in the Panhandle. The short man was one of Teemling's hands. His name was Gundy. Joey

Beth Venter's piercing scream was followed by the thunder of Moon's six-gun.

Venter hadn't liked their looks when they came through the year before. He liked them even less, now.

The third Texican was tall and gaunt, a man about forty. They called him Dakota Moon. He was Teemling's foreman. Moon's way of moving, and his grey-green eyes put Joey in mind of a mountain lion.

"All right," Beth Venter was saying. "You gentlemen cut out fifteen head, and drive them on. That's how many you gave us last year."

Gave. Joey wished his Ma hadn't used that term. And he wished Teemling and Gundy would stop staring at her, loose-lipped like that. His Ma was a lady, for all that she was dressed in men's Levis and denim work-shirt. And she was a mighty pretty lady.

Dakota Moon stared, too, his lean face brown as the saddle on his cow pony hitched to a nearby cottonwood beside the mounts of Teemling and Gundy. Moon's lips were tight, though.

Will Teemling shook his shaggy head, slapped his Stetson back on it. "That ain't the way it's going' to be, Ma'am. Yuh see, I been appointed by all the drovers to come for their rightful property." He pulled out makin's, started building a cigarette. "Reckon we'll be takin' 'em *all.* Sorry, Ma'am."

Joey looked out over the corral where a herd of longhorns grazed. They were sleek and fat, and every one a yearling. There were others beyond the corral, about a hundred and fifty head in all. The ranch was set in a little gulch. By fencing in one end, Joey and his Ma had kept the cattle from wandering themselves lean.

The boy's hands fisted as he swung back to face the trio.

"You lie!" he said between his teeth. "All Texas men ain't like *you!*"

Teemling glanced down at him. "You talk big for a fourteen-year-old."

"He's growed about foot since last year," Gundy chuckled. "Mebby he's gittin' too big for his jeans, Will."

Joey had just turned thirteen. But he was pretty tall for his age. His hands, feet, and blue eyes looked too large for the rest of him. When he grew up to them, though, he'd be quite a man.

He flicked his straw sky-piece back on his brown curls. "What you got to prove the others sent you?" he demanded. "Papers? Anything?"

"Joey," his Mother cautioned, "you be quiet. I'm sure we can straighten this out —somehow."

"With *these* jiggers?" Joey's laugh was mirthless, and with the squeak of a changing voice.

Teemling said, "We got no papers, Ma'am—just these." His fingers closed around the bone handle of a six-gun slung to his right hip.

Gundy grinned, and hitched his gun a bit forward. Dakota Moon's long fingers brushed up and down along his holster, and the muscles of his jaws lumped.

Beth Venter's blue eyes widened. "You wouldn't shoot a woman and a boy!"

"Wouldn't we?" Teemling drawled. His cigarette hung from grinning lips.

"Rustlers!" Joey spat. "That's all you are—low-down cow-thieves!"

"I'd say it's just the other way around, sonny," Gundy put in.

BETH turned on him. "That isn't true, Mr. Gundy, and you know it. Anyone will agree that what we did last year was a fine thing. When your cows bore calves on the trail what did you do with the newborn?"

Teemling shrugged. "We shot 'em. A new calf's too wobbly to keep up with the herd. If we waited for every cow to raise her calf, we'd be ten years from Texas to Dodge City!"

"Exactly," Beth agreed. "That's why all the Texas drovers were more than glad to give them to Joey and me. We brought them back here in our wagon. We nursed them off the bottle, cared for them like human babies." She waved a shapely arm toward the herd. "You see the results, Mr. Teemling."

Will Teemling saw the results all right. There was a young fortune in this herd.

And it was clear Teemling meant to have it. His dark eyes glittered as he stared again at Beth Venter.

He flipped his cigarette away. "You ain't got bills of sale for these critters, have you, Ma'am?"

"Of course not. They were all given—" She stopped, caught her breath.

"Then they ain't yours!" Teemling snapped. "Accordin' to range law, a calf

belongs to the cow's *owner*. So we'll bring our cowboys in the mornin', and get along with our work."

Joey had turned as Teemling spoke. Now, he strode rapidly toward the ranch-house.

"Joey!" his Mother called. "Where are you going?"

"Stand away, Ma!" Joey ground out. He didn't look back. "I'm runnin' these jiggers off!"

Behind him he heard metal scrape in leather. Then for the first time in his life, he heard the voice of Dakota Moon. It was like the crack of a rifle.

"*I'll* get him!"

Beth Venter's scream was followed by the thunder of Moon's six-gun. Joey was about twenty feet from the house. He saw the bullet splinter the door-jam.

"Stop, Joey!" Beth cried. "He'll kill you!"

Joey kept going. He heard Moon covering ground behind him. As Joey reached the stoop, the six-gun thundered again. He felt wind on his right ear. The door-jamb splintered a second time.

"Joey Venter, you stop in your tracks! Do you hear me?"

That was his Ma. Joey's hand was on the latch. He paused, then turned slowly. His lips trembled, and two big tears rolled down his freckled cheeks.

"Aw right, Ma," he said. "Aw right."

Then he looked at Dakota Moon. Moon had stopped a few feet back. He stood, the gun still smoking in his hand.

The skin over Moon's jaws showed white under his tan. "Guts!" he snarled. "I never seen the beat of it!"

Holstering the weapon, he came on then. He brushed Joey aside, and went into the house. A minute later he came out. A double-barreled sawed-off shotgun rested in the crook of his left arm.

"This was hangin' on the wall," he announced. He looked down at Joey. "It's a mean-lookin' weepon, boy. If you got any more hid away, you better tell me."

Joey didn't answer, just glared grimly up at Dakota Moon. Moon looked questioningly over to Beth.

"There are no more," she said hopelessly. "I wouldn't let him use them if there were."

Moon nodded. He walked back to Teemling and Gundy, Joey followed, and stood beside his Ma.

Teemling turned toward Beth. "We'll be back first thing in the mornin', ma'am. Meanwhile, you'll be watched. Savvy?"

Grinning, he looked down at Joey. "You ain't very respectful to yore elders, sonny," he muttered. "Reckon you need a leetle lesson."

Before anyone knew what he intended, Teemling doubled his big fist, sent it crashing into Joey's face. Joey groaned. He knew he slammed against the ground, then everything blacked out.

HE wakened to find himself cradled in the arms of Dakota Moon. Moon was carrying him toward the ranch-house. The man's face was like a rock; it looked that hard. Beth Venter was running along beside Moon. She told him to put Joey down, that she didn't want any help from him. Then Joey wriggled away. He landed on the ground, feet first.

Moon stopped. He looked first at Beth, then at Joey. Without a word, he went back to Teemling and Gundy. Teemling had taken the shotgun. Joey and his Ma stood there in the yard, watched the three Texicans mount. Joey put an arm around Beth's slim waist. After the men had ridden on, mother and son walked into the house together.

There was blood on Joey's face. He went out the back door, washed up at the pump. Then he sat on the back stoop started, whittling out a peewee with his jack-knife. After a while, Beth called him in for supper.

The house was small, but clean and neat as a new penny. The parlor and kitchen were all one. Beth's bedroom adjoined, and Joey slept in a little lean-to- off the back.

They ate in silence. Joey knew what his mother was thinking. He was thinking the same things . . .

A couple years before, Beth had brought him over here to the western strip of Oklahoma. The good land was pretty well taken up in Texas, and Beth's intention was to go in for truck farming. But one day Joey came home lugging a new-born calf. His ma asked where he got it. "A trail boss gave it to me," Joey told her. "They were goin' to shoot it."

That gave Beth the idea of building a herd of her own. She and Joey started following every trailherd that came through. Sometimes they'd haul back more than a dozen calves at a trip.

But now this man Teemling and his crew were going to take the cattle they'd raised.

Joey wasn't going to let them do it. He didn't tell his ma, but soon as it got dark enough, he'd go out to the barn and saddle his pony. The nearest ranch was thirty miles away. But he'd get there. He'd round up a crew of gun fighters, and *they'd* show those Texican a thing or two.

While Beth Venter cleared away the dishes, Joey lit a lamp. Then he covered the windows with their sack coverings. He waited until it got good and dark.

Then he put on his hat. "I'm goin' out for a breath of air, Ma," he said.

He went to the back door, opened it. On the stoop he halted. He heard a noise. A tall figure loomed out of the darkness. Dakota Moon stood in the beam of light.

"Goin' some place?" Moon growled.

He walked up on the stoop, grasped Joey by the shoulder, flung the boy back into the house. Then Moon stalked in, closed the door behind him.

"You little fool," he muttered. "Didn't Will *tell* you you'd be watched?"

Grim lipped, Joey sat down on the cot over by the wall. Beth Venter was standing by the table. She locked eyes with Dakota Moon. Pretty soon she looked down, and her shoulders gave a little shudder. Slowly, she lowered to a chair. Dakota Moon looked from her to Joey, said nothing. Beth took out some mending and started to work on it.

It was a silent vigil. Joey sat on the cot, shaping out a peewee His nether lip was up over his upper one as he watched the shavings fall on an old newspaper. Dakota Moon took a chair, where he could watch both Beth and Joey.

Every half hour or so he'd go to the back door, open it. He'd roll a cigarette, then lean there against the door-post, and stare somberly out into the darknes. Joey couldn't keep from watching him. His body swiveled like it was, Dakota's shoulders looked even broader than they really were. Silently, he'd blow a lungful of smoke outside. Sometimes the night breeze would carry the smoke back to swirl around his lean body, with the holstered gun laying there against his right hip like it belonged there. Joey couldn't take his eyes off the man's face; the high forehead under a big sombrero, the aquiline nose, and tawny mustache. And Joey saw blood on Dakota's sleeve. That was *his* blood. Dakota's sleeve had got smeared while he was carrying the boy. Joey decided that if he had a dad he'd want him to look just like Dakota Moon.

And he felt ashamed. Because he wouldn't want his dad to be a rustler.

JOEY didn't remember much about his dad. He knew Tom Ventner was a cowpoke on a spread over in Texas, and that he'd got caught in one of those Longhorn stampedes. Joey was only three or four at the time. Beth stayed on as cook at the ranch her husband had ridden for. Of course, she had lots of matrimonial offers. But she saved up until she was able to buy this little layout in Oklahoma.

Now, every once in a while, Joey caught his ma looking strangely at Dakota Moon. And Joey didn't like that.

Toward midnight, Beth Venter walked over to the cook-stove. She busied herself for a while. Joey went to the table, sat down.

His ma said, "I've fixed some cake and coffee. I'm putting on a plate for you, Mr. Moon."

Dakota was standing by the back door. He looked around, shook his head. Then he went on smoking, staring outside.

After the cake, Joey felt drowsy. He tried to keep his eyes open, but couldn't. He returned to the cot, and lay down. How long he slept, he didn't know. But it was still dark when Dakota Moon's voice wakened him.

Dakota was sitting across from Beth Venter. He had removed his sombrero, and set it on the table between them.

He was saying, "When Will said he was ridin', I didn't ask where. I didn't know what he was up to 'till we got here." The man bent forward over the table. "I never minded rustlin' for Teemling," he went on. "There's hardly a Texas cowman ain't slapped his brand on the wrong Longhorn sometime or another. Plenty of 'em got their start that way, an' nobody thinks

nothin' of it. But—" He shook his head. "—Women an' kids—"

"You tried to kill my boy," Beth said. "I can't forget that."

"You're wrong there, ma'am," Dakota said earnestly. "I saved your boy's life, if the truth be known. If Teemling or Gundy had got their guns out first, they'd've shot to kill. I missed Joey because I wanted to miss him."

Neither Beth or Dakota spoke for a while after that. Joey lay there watching them, a sort of warm feeling running through him.

"I dunno who's right an' who's wrong on this deal, Mrs. Venter," Dakota said finally. "You an' Joey should've spent the winter branding them dogies. An unbranded critter belongs to any man strong enough to take him."

"They're ours," Beth declared. "Brand or no brand. We've kept them alive for a year, and they're ours."

Dakota nodded. "You got something comin', all right," he agreed. "Teemling an' five boys'll be in at dawn. I'll have a talk with Will. An' now, ma'am, if you don't mind, I could use a cup of that coffee."

Beth brought his coffee, and a big slice of cake. Dakota waded in. He smiled, and told her it tasted mighty good.

"Reckon what you need around here is a man," Dakota said. Following an afterthought, he looked toward the cot.

Joey sat up.

"Sorry, boy," Dakota said. "Didn't know you was awake. You'll be a man some day. But we just ain't got time to wait, right now." He grinned.

And Joey grinned back at him. Dakota brought his head down sharply, and winked one of his eyes.

He asked, "Just where was you goin' when I come in?"

Joey told him.

"I figured you'd try goin' for help," Dakota said. "So I told the boys I was comin' in to keep an eye on you. They're out there watchin', Joey. You wouldn't've stayed alive ten minutes."

"Thank you, Mr. Moon," Beth Venter said fervently. Tears were in her eyes. "Thanks—for everything."

There wasn't much said the rest of the night. Joey didn't sleep any more. He watched Dakota and his ma. Sometimes he caught Dakota staring at her. And Dakota's eyes would lose their stoney look then. Beth Venter knew he was looking at her. Joey figured his ma wasn't exactly displeased, either. She went on with her sewing, the lamp making the highlights of her golden hair shimmer. She watched Dakota Moon, too, when he went to the back door for a smoke. Her eyes would get a bit moist, and a little smile would play on her red lips.

"Tell me, Mr. Moon," she said once, "did the other Texas men send Will Teemling here?"

"No, ma'am," Dakota told her. "Will lied about that. There's been talk about what you done last year. Reckon that's how Will got the idea of comin'. But the others figger what you done was mighty smart an' mighty fine. They're all for you, ma'am."

At daybreak, Dakota stood up. Then Joey heard horses in the distance outside. Dakota pulled his sixgun, checked the loads, slid the weapon back in its holster. The horses stopped down by the corral. Joey heard men dismount, start walking toward the house.

"Keep near the inner wall," Dakota said softly. "An' down low." Grimly, he faced the front door.

"Dakota," Joey's ma whipered, "what about you?"

Dakota didn't look at her. "Don't worry about me, Beth," he said.

Then Will Teamling's voice came from the yard. "Come on, Dakota!" Teemling yelled. "We're ready to start work!"

Dakota walked slowly to the door. Joey saw his ma's eyes on him. The boy slipped out the back way. He wasn't going to miss anything.

Outside, Joey slithered along the back of the house. Reaching the corner, he saw three mounted men down by the corral. They were holding four riderless horses. Joey recognized one pony as Dakota's mount.

FLATTENED against the house, Joey toed his way to the front corner. Cautiously, he peered out. First he saw Teemling, Gundy, and another cowpoke standing in the yard. Teemling was carrying the shotgun in the crook of his arm. Joey followed their gazes to the front step. Dakota

Moon stood tall there, looking down at Teemling and his men. Dakota's booted feet were spread slightly, and his long arms hung loosely at his sides.

"Come on," Teemling said impatiently. "What yuh waitin' for, Dakota?"

"I'll be with you," Dakota replied. "First, you got a little business to transact, Will."

Teemling looked at him questioningly. "Business? What do yuh mean?"

"Just this," Dakota said evenly. "You're payin' Mrs. Venter an' her boy forty dollars apiece for each of the last twelve months back, same as any cowhand gets. An' you're payin' 'em a fair price for a year's rent of their property. After that, we'll drive the herd on."

Teemling laughed shortly. "What's eatin' you, Dakota?" he said. "You must be locoed."

"I ain't locoed, Will," Dakota replied. "You heard what I said. That's the way she stands."

Gundy said, "Careful, Will. Dakota don't talk much. When he does, he means it."

"Careful hell!" Teemling snarled. "I got this scatter-gun in my hands, ain't I? Dakota's gun's in the holster, ain't it?" His eyes never left his foreman. "Come on, Dakota, an' quit talkin' like a fool!"

Dakota bit out one word:

"Dig!"

"I'll dig," Teemling said, *"for this!"* He came up with the shotgun.

Dakota's right hand was away from Joey. So Joey didn't see the blur. But he saw gunflame spurt from Dakota. Teemling screamed. His arms flew wide, and the shotgun cut an arc through the air. Joey made a dive for it as Teemling went down.

Gundy went for his six, and laid one on Dakota. Dakota shot just once more. Gundy's pistol spun like a top, and Gundy stood wringing an electrified hand.

Then Joey Venter's high-pitched voice cracked out: "Drop 'em, you skunks! Git, or I'll give you both barrels!"

The cowpokes down by the corral were too far away to do much harm even if they wanted to. The hand that had come with Teemling and Gundy hadn't even gone for his hogleg. And the fight was out of most of them when they saw Teemling go down.

From the tail of his eye, Joey saw Dakota Moon slumped down on the stoop. Dakota was bleeding. Then Beth Venter came out.

"Git!" Joey repeated. "An' don't come back! Take your boss's carcass along, too!" He tried hard as he could to make his voice sound like Dakota's.

Gundy and the other hand lugged Teemling's body to the corral. They loaded their boss on his horse. The crew rode on, leaving Dakota's mount.

Joey turned then to the stoop. Dakota was getting shakily to his feet. With Joey's help, and Beth's, he made it in to the cot. Gundy's slug had gone through his left shoulder. It was an ugly wound, but the bullet had missed the bone by a fraction.

Beth cleansed the wound, and bandaged Dakota's shoulder. Dakota was in pain, but all the while he watched Beth's face, and his eyes took on that soft look again.

Once he looked over to Joey. "Reckon you're more of a man than I gave you credit for, Joe," he grinned.

That meant an awful lot to Joey, coming from Dakota. He grinned, and started for the back door. On the stoop, he hesitated.

"Beth," he heard Dakota say, "I never did forget you an' Joey from last year."

"You were a long time coming back to us, Dakota," Joey's ma replied.

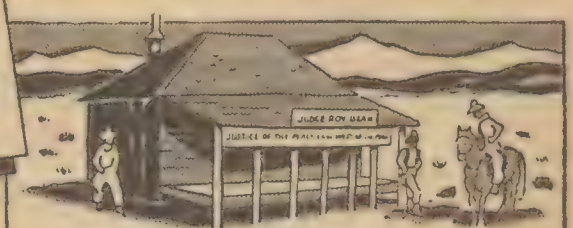
Joey Venter went out back. He gave his newly fashioned peewee a whack with a stick. Watching it fly through the air, he wondered if it was going to be much trouble getting his name changed to Joe Moon.

A Fiction House Magazine

the LAW WEST of the PECOS!

the NOTORIOUS "JUDGE" ROY BEAN --WITH ONE LAW BOOK, NO LEGAL TRAINING AND A PAIR OF SIX-SHOOTERS HE METED OUT FRONTIER JUSTICE IN A QUAINT MANNER--MANY OF HIS DECISIONS MADE NEWSPAPER HEADLINES FROM COAST TO COAST--FROM 1882 UNTIL HIS DEATH IN 1903.

ONE OF THE BETTER KNOWN LEGENDS ABOUT THE "JUDGE" IS THIS: FINDING A DEAD CHINESE, BEAN SEARCHED HIM AND TOOK OFF A SIX-GUN AND FORTY DOLLARS. "I'LL FINE HIM $40 FOR CARRYIN' THAT GUN AND CONFISCATE THE SHOOTIN' IRON!"



UPON ANOTHER OCCASION HE HAD A LAWYER CHAINED TO A TREE WHEN THE LAWYER THREATENED TO APPEAL FROM A BEAN DECISION!!! AND HIS "BEAR AND STAKE" METHOD FOR SOBERING UP DRUNKS WAS REALLY UNIQUE.

IN ONE CROWDED ROOM THIS COLORFUL CHARACTER COMBINED HIS COURT, SALOON AND COUNTRY STORE... HE NAMED THE NEARBY TOWN IN HONOR OF THE BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH ACTRESS, LILY LANGTRY, WHOM HE NEVER MET... SHE VISITED THE PLACE AFTER HE HAD DIED.

THE SIX-GUN SMILE

By JOE MUSGRAVE

They took the dude with the gangling stride and the turtle-slow draw and crowned him with a lawman's badge. Then Carson, Texas, sat back and laughed . . . waiting for the one-sided shootout.

THE STAGECOACH came fast down the parched, heat-battered slope, rocking and bouncing on the rutted road which slanted into the little Texas town of Carson.

The thin, white-faced man who was the sole passenger in the stage roused from his thoughts, glanced wryly at the motely collection of unpainted stores and houses. Kip Lorrimer, until six months ago top man in the Texas Rangers, was going back on the job, going back in a role he did not fancy.

He looked down at his clothes, making one last survey of himself before the coach stopped. Because of the six long months he had spent in the hospital after being blasted from the saddle by a rustler's gun, he felt unsure of himself, unsure of his mission. His old self-confidence, his once sure strength, his deadly skill with a gun, all were gone. A man doesn't linger between life and death for days on end only to emerge the same person he was before.

But the stubborn pride sent Kip Lorrimer back into the service as soon as he could get about, made him ask for this assignment. Somewhere in this town was the gunman who had shot him down in a narrow canyon about fifty miles north of Carson. His face, as he had leaped out from behind a boulder, was masked, but Lorrimer would recognize anywhere the deadly, oddly distinctive manner in which the man drew and fired. He had moved with the cold, ugly grace of a rattlesnake, his shoulders weaving as he flogged shots into the Ranger.

The stage ground to a stop. Without getting down, the driver pitched a skimpy bundle of mail and Lorrimer's two travelling bags to the ground. Kip got out stiffly, noting the sign on the building "Grober's General Store and Postoffice". He did not turn as the stage ground into motion behind him.

A fat, red-faced, smiling man bustled onto the sun-washed porch in time to wave at the departing driver. Then he hurried down the steps and picked up the mail bag. His eyes fastened on Lorrimer.

"A dude!" he exclaimed. "Why, you must be from the East?"

Kip flushed before the man's gaze. It was part of Lorrimer's game to play an Easterner out West for his health. His carefully-cut grey suit, narrow-brimmed felt hat, and pointed black shoes dressed him for the part. In that get-up, along with his hospital pallor and the accents he remembered from his mother, who had been a New Yorker, no one would take him for a Ranger.

But before Kip could reply, the man rushed on in a flow of words, introducing himself as Hank Grober, owner of the store and also mayor and postmaster of Carson. Then abruptly Grober froze, his gaze riveted on some object across the street. The twinkle in his eyes flared and his face whitened.

"Let's get inside," he said. "All hell's gonna break loose in a minute."

Lorrimer turned. A slight middle-aged cowpuncher in a sweat-stained yellow shirt and scarred chaps stood across the street in the doorway of the blacksmith shop. He was a mild-looking man, busily engaged in rolling a cigarette. From the high, awkward way he carried his gun, Kip Lorrimer was certain he didn't wear the trouble-maker brand.

But when the Ranger looked back, puzzled, at Grober, he began to understand. A new figure had appeared on the porch, a lean, hard-faced man, with the expressionless eyes of a cat. And his eyes were

fastened on the cigarette roller at the blacksmith shop.

Lorrimer picked up his bags and followed Grober into the store. He knew the panther breed of the man who had appeared so suddenly on the porch. He was a professional gunhawk and his cold, intent manner told that he was looking for trouble.

"That's Niles Trent, top hand for Rocky Norris," Grober explained nervously when they stood at a window. "I wondered why he's been sticking so close around here for the past few days. He's been waiting for Sandy MacLane to come to town. That's Sandy over there, foreman of Carter Blalock's spread."

"MacLane!" the gunhawk called. "I got somethin' to say to you."

The cowman straightened. There was surprise on his face. Then Trent was in the street, his booted feet stirring the grey dust as he moved forward.

There were suddenly faces, blurred and strained, in the windows and doorways along the street.

"You been spreadin' lies about me, MacLane," Trent said loudly, "been talkin' that you saw me cuttin' Blalock's fences. A man don't take that kind of talk in the cow country, MacLane. And I ain't laughin' this lie off like some of your talk in the past."

Sandy still stood in front of the blacksmith shop, holding his unlighted cigarette, looking dazed by the thing that was happening to him. His throat worked but he didn't speak.

Trent was only a few yards from the puncher when he stopped. He stood there, his right hand shoved low, his long fingers crooked close by his holster. "Speak up, MacLane," he snarled. "Admit you were lyin'."

The Blalock foreman was looking death in the face and he knew it. He had to eat dirt or fight. And a child could tell he was no gun-fighter.

With infinite slowness, MacLane raised the unlit cigarette to his lips. From his vantage point in the store, Kip tensed. The cornered man made a try at a grin, but his eyes were bleak, tortured pools.

"Go to hell, Trent!" And as he spoke, his hand went clawing for his gun, driving with a speed born of desperation.

Trent was cocked and waiting for the move. He seemed to weave back with a strange, deadly grace. Lorrimer caught the motion of the gunhawk's shoulders, the right one coming back and dropping. But the movement of Trent's gun hand was too swift to follow.

Two jolting reports chopped off MacLane's final words. The puncher was flung half around as the gunhawk's lead caught him. He teetered awkwardly a moment, and then with his back to Trent collapsed. He lay with his gun under him, its barrel still lodged in the holster.

Kip Lorrimer's breath caught in his throat as he watched the gunhawk crouching wide-legged, his six-shooter hip-high and the smoke dribbling from the muzzle into the quiet air. Only one man drew and shot like that: the masked gunman who had bushwhacked Lorrimer! Niles Trent!

Kip started for the door, muscles tense. Then he abruptly checked himself. This wasn't the time to settle with Trent. He knew a court would demand more proof than he could now offer.

Trent watched callously until MacLane lay quiet. Then he straightened, glancing around him while his fingers automatically replaced the two discharged shells from his gun.

The unnatural quiet snapped and there was a swirling buzz of voices. Men began to edge from doorways, move toward the motionless figure lying before the blacksmith shop. Everyone of them knew he had seen cold-blooded murder committed, but the code of the cattle country would protect Trent from prosecution. He had fought in defense of his reputation and the fact that he had killed the only man who could sully that reputation in court put him permanently in the clear. He also had tricked MacLane into making the first move for his gun.

With an excited oath, Grober turned from the window. "This is the start. Now the guns will be out in the open. It'll be open war between the Blalock and Norris outfits, and what can ordinary punchers do against hired gunhands?"

Grober abruptly realized what he was saying. He clamped his mouth shut nervously, hurried toward the door. But his words repeated themselves in Lorrimer's ears. Perhaps there was more for a Ranger

to do in Carson than corner Niles Trent.

AS Kip started after Grober, he saw a red point of light flare into being in the rear of the store. It was a cigar held by a man he hadn't seen before, a big man, black-browed and heavy shouldered, who sat near the back counter. While every other citizen of the town shouldered into the street, this one man sat smoking as quietly and calmly as though nothing had happened.

The pose didn't ring true to Lorrimer, but after a long glance at the cigar-smoker, he went out on the porch. Kip noted that the gunman had swung around so that he was facing down the street. He seemed to be waiting, his attention focused on two figures standing a block away by a hitching post. As the two figures flung onto their horses, rode hard toward the blacksmith shop, the crowd around the dead man scattered.

A man ran up on the porch beside Kip. "It's Old Blalock and his son, Cary!" he exclaimed. Then as the two horsemen bore down on the gunhawk, he added, "They're gonna ride him down!"

But the riders swerved their horses toward the blacksmith shop, reined up abruptly. The stern-faced old man, his faded blue eyes sparking fire under bushy white eyebrows, glared at Trent. He was a gaunt, sunblackened man, showing the ravages of sixty-three years of hard, unceasing labor.

His son hit the ground in one swift motion, ran to MacLane. He turned the cowman over with an awkward tenderness, saw he had come too late. Anger spattered the boy's face, twisted the skin tight about his mouth.

Cary was young, not more than twenty, with blue eyes and a firm, strong mouth, an unlined replica of his father's face. He wheeled towards Trent.

"Damn you, Trent."

"Careful!" cautioned Trent. "He got it for shooting off his mouth. You Blalock boys are gettin' too quick with your mouths."

"You rotten coyote," exploded Cary. "I guess you and Norris feel mighty proud gunning down a helpless cowpoke. Mebbe you're ready for a taste of your own medicine."

The boy knew Trent's reputation, but he was beyond caution. The gun on his hip looked new and unused.

"This is Norris' lowest, sneaking trick yet," Cary angrily continued. "but if it's fight you want that's what you'll get."

"Why, you . . . !" spat Trent. "I don't take that from any man!"

The gunhawk's eyes were narrow, evil slits, his right hand a claw poised above his gun butt. He took a swaying half-step backwards.

"That's enough!" Old Blalock's voice was a club separating the men. He urged his horse between Trent and Cary. "Get on your horse, Cary, and shut up. Don't you know you're giving this rattlesnake exactly what he wants?"

Something in the old man's rough, harsh voice caught and held the younger man. For the space of a breath, Cary stood fast, then he turned and threw himself in the saddle.

A smile flicked Trent's thin mouth. "Better keep him home," he told Blalock, "until you cut those apron strings. He might stray out of daddy's sight one day and get in real trouble."

The grizzled rancher stared at Trent with open contempt. "You'll have a chance yet to earn your salary, if Norris can figure out another scheme like this," he said. "But from here on don't expect the going to be so easy. I've handled varmints before."

He rode off with his son, leaving Trent cursing. The gunhawk's hand twitched, but he made no further move to interfere with the two riders. As he rode, the rancher called to an onlooker, telling him to take care of MacLane's body until he could send in a wagon for it.

Trent moved down the street with a scowl, angling toward the saloon a few doors below the general store. Lorrimer watched him for a moment, wondering if when the time came he could face the outlaw with Old Blalock's coolness. Kip turned into the store to get his suitcases.

But he halted as soon as he swung around. In the doorway stood the heavy-set man who had sat quietly through the excitement. In his middle forties, he was almost too immaculately dressed for this rough country. His florid face, fleshy jowls and prominent paunch told of good living,

but despite his fleshiness he gave the impression of bull-like strength.

From under the shadow of his wide-brimmed white Stetson, he stared after the Blalocks. There was an odd intensity in his gaze and he gripped the cigar in the corner of his mouth tightly. Then he shifted his glance to Grober, and his black eyes were abruptly masked.

"What's the trouble, mayor?" he asked, rolling the cigar with his tongue.

Grober appeared to weigh his answer. "Trent tangled with the Blalock crowd. MacLane got hurt—permanently."

The big man took the cigar out of his mouth, gazed reflectively at its ash. "Too bad," he said, and swaggered down the steps towards the saloon. His boots gleamed like mirrors and with every step there was a glint of silver from the fancy gun on his hip. Kip instinctively disliked him.

As though he read the question in Lorrimer's mind, Grober cocked his head toward the man. "That's Rocky Norris. You'll hear a lot about him if you stay around a spell."

II

KIP LORRIMER found lodging at Doc Nelson's rambling old house on the main street. The Doc had cultivated a greater taste for liquor than for work, so his daughter, Susan, took in boarders.

Susan was the prettiest thing Kip had seen in all his life, with her blonde hair, honey-colored skin and disconcerting brown eyes. She was mighty grown up for an eighteen-year-old, and there was no doubt but what she was boss in the Nelson household. She rode close herd on her stooped, balding, absent-minded father, and made her boarders toe the line besides.

Because of Susan, Kip soon came to regret his dude get-up. Brought up in a world of strong, hard outdoor men, her feelings for this thin, pallid man and his store-bought clothes amounted to thinly veiled distaste. But his second day at the house, she did ask him about the clash between Trent and the Blalocks.

"That fellow Cary said some harsh things to Trent," he said. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised to see him come looking for Trent sometime when his father isn't around."

He immediately regretted his words when he saw the fear come to her face. It hadn't occurred to him that Susan had a personal interest in the quarrel.

"Cary's a fool to try to buck Norris," she suddenly declared. "About all he and his daddy have left is pride and temper. Those aren't enough to beat a man who in five years has swallowed up every worthwhile acre of range around Carson."

Kip looked away, not liking to see the desperate helplessness in her eyes.

"Cary manages the Blalock Ranch now," she continued. "He's got enough trouble with drought and rustlers and accidents without picking a quarrel with Niles Trent and those other gun-toters who ride for Norris."

Kip wasn't certain yet, but from what little he had heard since his arrival, the pieces were beginning to fit in a pattern he recognized. It had happened on other ranges. Wrecked fences. Dwindling herds. Unexplained accidents to men and property. And one man grew stronger, thriving on the misfortune of his fellows.

He knew there was no law in Carson. The town had been without a sheriff for six months. None of the townspeople were anxious to place themselves between Blalock and Norris by pinning on a star. Outsiders didn't last long against men like Trent.

Lorrimer spent the rest of the day strolling around Carson, talking with the friendly punchers and tradesmen, picking up all the information he could about Norris. Five years was a short time for a stranger to become such a power in the range country, and his rise coincided exactly with the highly organized rustling which had ravaged the ranches in a two-hundred mile circle around Carson. Kip had been working on that rustling case when he was shot.

Niles Trent began to look like only a pawn in a game much bigger than Kip originally suspected.

That evening after supper, Kip followed Doc Nelson outside, suggested a glass of beer at the saloon. The saloon was the main hangout of the Norris men. It was run by a woman named Donna Williams.

The Doc led the way down the dusty street. His steps slowed momentarily when he saw the almost deserted hitching rail.

Only three drowsy cow ponies were tied there. The Doc's action was a small thing, but Lorrimer was to recall it later.

The bartender greeted Nelson by name, nodded to Lorrimer. He was a fat, red-faced man, completely bald, and as he waited for their order he stroked his yellow-stained mustache. The Doc had whiskey, while Kip took a beer. Except for Rocky Norris who sat alone at a table the place was deserted.

But as Nelson poured his second whiskey, a woman came from a back room. She was black-haired, dark-eyed, with a graceful, sensuous walk. Rocky clearly had expensive tastes in women. He was the one who had brought Donna to Carson and given her the saloon.

"Take it easy, doctor," she smiled. "Remember a man in your business can't cut loose like a cowpuncher." Then she turned to the ranger, shook hands man-fashion. "Kinda quiet yet," she apologized. "The crowd's late tonight, but I imagine things will pick up after awhile."

Kip felt uneasy under the keen scrutiny of her eyes and was glad when she left them. As she predicted, men soon began to drift into the saloon. They were a hard-looking lot, and in their unusual quietness, he sensed an undercurrent of tension. Norris' eyes checked them off as they arrived, but Trent was the only one who approached him.

The lean, somber gunhawk slid into a chair beside his boss, began to talk rapidly. Norris looked at him and scowled. Then abruptly the street outside was filled with the clatter of galloping horses. Boots hammered on the board porch and a wedge of men smashed through the batwings with drawn guns, flinging out along the rear wall of the saloon in a watchful line.

FROM all sides of the building came the sound of excited animals. Kip looked at the big open windows, saw angry-faced men sitting their mounts, rifles ready. Norris' men froze over their drinks.

Trent spun to his feet. His movement jarred the paralysis from the men around him and many of them leaped up.

But Cary Blalock's grating, hate-filled voice stabbed them into stillness. "One false move and this place will be a slaughter house," he warned. "We've come for just two men, but start anything and you'll all get it!"

Trent read the odds, and slowly sat down, keeping his hands in plain sight. Norris just sat staring at young Blalock.

"Do as he says, men." Norris said. He managed a humorless smile, while the room quieted. Then he added, "Going in for holdups, now, Cary? You know men get hung in Texas for stunts like this."

"Men get hung for a lot of things in Texas," Cary flung back. "You're gonna learn that tonight the hard way, Norris! We caught you and your coyotes dead to rights tonight. We trapped you! We put out the bait and you swallowed it!"

Kip began to see light. The Blalocks had set a trap by placing a herd in a remote section of their ranch adjoining a wild, canyon-cut area. The situation was ready-made for rustlers—apparently. But when the Norris crowd swept down on the "unguarded" herd, they met a hail of fire from hidden guards.

That was why the saloon was deserted. Trent was leading the night raid. That was why the returning gunhawks had been so tense and uneasy while Trent reported to Norris.

"Yeah, we were waiting for you this time." There was a grim note of triumph in Cary's voice. "Your thieves are well trained, Norris. They got their wounded away in the dark but there wasn't much they could do with a couple of dead horses!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rocky growled. "My men haven't been out of town. And you don't see any bullet holes in them, do you?"

Cary barked: "I said you hid your wounded. But those horses gave you away. One of them had Trent's saddle on it. That's evidence enough for us. You and Trent have bled your last Carson rancher."

Except for the nervous shifting of the mounted men outside, no one moved. Kip watched the trigger-tense room. The slightest gesture would set it off.

There was the faint shine of perspiration on Norris' face. "You're riding the wrong track," he said, beginning to lose his jauntiness. "I've been here all evening. And as to Trent's saddle and those horses—well—I've suffered from rustlers the same as

you. My whole outfit knows twelve of my horses and a lot of gear were stolen only two nights ago, so the law wouldn't look on their presence on your land as evidence against me. Those weren't my boys. You can't identify 'em."

Kip nervously wet his lips with his tongue and eased away from the bar. It was time he made his play and already he felt he was foredoomed to failure. It was grim irony that he should be placed in the position of trying to protect two men he felt were guilty, but as a rancher, it was his duty to intervene.

"Great Scott, man," cried Norris. "I don't like you any more than you do me, but I didn't come raging after you just because a few rustlers raided my horses."

Kip took a deep breath. He suddenly realized that out of that entire room, one person alone was watching him, watching him with a curious intentness. It was Donna Williams. Then swiftly her eyes left him, widening in surprise as they fell on a man who had appeared from the back of the saloon.

"Wait a minute, now!" came Hank Grober's familiar voice. "Listen to me, Cary!" The mayor had slipped into the room.

"Stay out of this, Grober," snapped young Blalock. "There's been enough talking. We're ready to act."

'Listen to me!" Grober pleaded. "I've been your friend and your father's friend and I've got a right to be heard. You know I don't take any sides in this trouble, but this thing you're planning will destroy you and your father, ruin in a few minutes everything he has worked and fought for all his life."

The boy glowered at the mayor, but Grober went on talking, smoothly, reasonably. He hadn't run a general store for years without learning a great deal about human nature.

"You were right in cutting down on those rustlers. In fact, I bet your dad planned it. But he didn't plan this!" Grober's statement wasn't as much a shot in the dark as it seemed. He knew Old Blalock inside and out. "The old man would be crazy mad if he knew about this. He respects the law and he wants you to. You can't hang people just because you don't like them, and that's what this amounts to right now. You haven't one single piece of real proof."

Cary bit his lip. "I know they're guilty," he blurted, and the fact that he argued, showed the crisis was past.

Kip relaxed and leaned back against the bar. It was Grober's show now. Cary continued to protest:

"How can we do anything legal in this town when there's no sheriff? Who's going to enforce the law if we don't do it ourselves?"

"You're right, son," Grober agreed. "We're all at fault there, especially me. It's time we had some law, but not six-gun law. You go on home peaceable now, and I'll promise to appoint a sheriff and his first case will be to investigate this rustling charge. You and these boys with you are good people, and I want you to stay that way."

"All right, Grober, we'll do it your way this time," Cary promised. "We respect your word." He glared across the room at Norris, showing that his suspicions were in no way lessened by his decision. He started his men out the door.

AS they moved off, a mutter of angry conversation swept the room. But Norris knew how to shift the anger of his men to good humor. He stood up smiling, giving every appearance of having enjoyed a good joke.

"Step up to the bar," he called. "Let's drink to our level-headed mayor. As for that young hothead, Blalock, he'll be laughed out of town for this crazy stunt."

Lorrimer watched Grober stamp out the door. The mayor wasn't a drinking man.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Donna Williams' voice. "Take the Doc on home, will you?" she asked. "He sneaked more than enough drinks during the excitement. Neither of us will be very popular with his daughter if he has another one."

Nelson heard her and angrily muttered that he was all right. But when Kip looked at him, he knew Donna was right. The Doc was unsteady on his feet.

"You know better than to do this," Donna told Nelson. "Anybody would think you were actually looking for trouble. Now get out of here quick."

Donna's words seemed to sober the Doc.

He went along with Lorrimer without protest, walking unsteadily along the dark street. The first two rooms on the left side of the house were the Doc's, serving respectively as his office and bedroom. With a muffled goodnight, he turned into his office. Kip felt his way down the dark hall to his own room.

Kip was tired, but he practiced awhile with his gun. He was left-handed, and morning and night he worked at flipping the gun from his holster. One day soon he would be wearing that gun again, and he worked hard to recover some of his old skill. Finally, he blew out his lamp, opened his shuttered windows, stood looking out into the darkness, mulling over the scene in the saloon.

A board creaked in the front of the house. Kip heard the front door open. There was no mistaking the scuffle of boots in the hall. He hurried to his own door.

At the end of the hall, light pencilled from beneath Doc Nelson's door. Kip could see a man's legs to the knee in the faint light. A minute passed and the man didn't move. The Doc had too much liquor in him to stand so quietly. Was someone trying to rob Nelson?

Kip eased his door closed, and picking up his gun, went to the window and climbed outside. He moved along the house until he reached Nelson's office. He looked through a crack in the shutters.

The Doc was working over a blood-stained figure sprawled on a table. Niles Trent stood beside him, holding a lamp. The injured man breathed with uneven gasps. The sound slowed, then abruptly choked off, leaving a painful stillness in the room.

"You drunken, bungling fool," Trent snarled. "Tryin' to drink everything in the saloon when you knew we might need you. I oughta jam my fist down your guzzling throat."

Doc Nelson put down his instruments and looked at Trent.

"Maybe I'm not much of a doctor. If I were, I wouldn't have crooks like you sneaking in here in the middle of the night. That man is dead only because you thought of your own hide instead of his. You left him to bleed to death while you went running to Norris."

The older man's show of fight took Trent by surprise. The gun-hawk looked at Nelson for a moment, then fury wrent his face and he slashed his fist into the Doc's mouth. The doctor struck the floor heavily, lay with his eyes open, but glazed. Trent stood over him.

"Don't think you can talk like that because Norris is sweet on your daughter," he grated. "I'm about to convince him he can get her a lot easier with you out of the way. He's tired of your stalling."

Lorrimer waited until he was certain no further harm would come to Nelson. Then he returned to his room.

III

KIP was taken aback by Susan's reception the next morning.

"My father is a little old to be drinking and fighting in saloons, Mr. Lorrimer. If you wish to stay here, you will not take him to such places.

Apparently she thought the Doc's swollen lip had come from a barroom fight.

Kip made no attempt at defense. Ordinarily, he would have been amused, but today it wasn't funny. He left the house, strolled aimlessly down the street. As he came abreast of the livery stable, Hank Grober rode out without noticing Kip.

On a sudden impulse, Lorrimer turned into the stable. Maybe he'd feel better if he had a horse under him again. The cotton-headed boy in charge of the stable seemed doubtful about entrusting a horse to a dude, but Kip assured him he had learned to ride in the East.

At the edge of town, he turned into the first winding cowpath he crossed, eased the horse into a lope. To his surprise the newly-healed wounds didn't pain him. His strength had come back fast since he arrived in Carson. The slap of the hot wind in his face was good and he went on following the faint track through the dry weeds and cactus clumps.

It was nearly two hours later when the rolling prairie shifted to low, ravine-cut slopes. He found himself idly following a single set of hoof marks. The track was easy to pick out because the right front shoe was irregular as though specially fitted to a misformed hoof. The land continued to climb higher until Kip came out

on a high rim overlooking a basin of grazing land.

Below him he saw sweating punchers starting a herd out of the basin, moving it back toward the flatlands. Out of the haze of dust rode a figure he recognized. It was Cary Blalock.

Kip turned his horse and rode along the rim. After he'd gone about a hundred yards, a horse nickered a short way ahead of him. Scrubby mesquite brush hampered his vision, but he vaguely saw a man rear up on the trail ahead, run heavily to his horse beyond a shield of branches and drive down the slope away from the rim in a plunging descent.

Kip reined up at the spot the rider deserted, swung down from the saddle. The only fresh hoof marks on the rim were the same ones he had been following.

His eyes went to the edge of the bluff. A man had knelt behind a shielding boulder, peering down. His knee prints were in the dust, and beside them a faint mark where a rifle butt had rested.

Kip looked down over the boulder and guessed the reason. Cary Blalock sat his horse just out of rifle shot. The hidden man had been waiting for the boy to come within range when Lorrimer unexpectedly rode up on him.

Sunk deep in thought, Kip followed the path, thinking it might take him down into the basin and he could warn Cary. But the trail dipped back towards town and a half hour later Kip drew up in a stand of trees along the bank of a dry stream. In flood times, the river had cut deep into the earth, so that the banks rose high above the bed.

The ranger was beginning to feel the effects of his long ride after being so long out of the saddle, so he dismounted, wandered to a shady spot and sat down. Minutes later he heard a rider picking his way up the river bed. Hank Grober came in view, got down from his horse not fifty feet from where Kip rested.

Kip's curiosity was immediately aroused and it promptly increased when he saw Carter Blalock ride up the dry bed from the other direction. Fate had given him an excellent opportunity to eavesdrop and after momentary qualms he decided to make the best of it. He moved to a vantage point directly above the two men, lay down flat out of their view.

"I wanted to see you," Blalock said, "and since you're in a ticklish spot, I thought it'd be better to do it secretly. Otherwise, Norris would say you were taking sides."

Grober smiled. "Whenever it will do any good," he declared, "I'm glad to say who my real friends are."

"You proved that last night," Blalock said warmly. "I sure appreciate you keeping my boy out of trouble. He's got more temper than common sense, and those damn fool punchers of mine would ride to hell if he'd only lead them."

Grober squatted in the shade of the bank, squinted up at the rancher.

"Of course Norris was behind that raid," continued Blalock, "but Cary couldn't actually prove he was on our range. They made my men look like kids the way they slid out of our trap slick as a whistle. No, last night was no time for a lynching."

Grober spat reflectively, watched Blalock walk back and forth in front of him.

"Norris wasn't on that raid," he said, "and catching Trent wouldn't catch Norris. You could jail every man working for Rocky and he'd still be in the clear. He's a smart hombre, too smart for honest folks to handle."

BLALOCK kicked a pebble angrily. "I know that," he growled despairingly. "That's why I asked the rangers to clean up this rotten business. I wrote them twice, in fact, and they haven't even seen fit to write and tell me they weren't interested."

Lorrimer stiffened at the rancher's words. He knew definitely ranger headquarters had never received a letter from Blalock. His investigation had been independently begun.

"Well, we'll get us a good lawman," Grober consoled him, "and clean this thing up ourselves. After last night, Norris can't oppose me when I appoint a sheriff."

"Could be," the rancher said doubtfully. "That's why I asked you to come here, so Norris wouldn't think I was influencing your selection. Actually, I didn't want to talk about the new sheriff at all."

Blalock paused, appeared embarrassed by what he must say. He was a proud man, and he didn't like to ask favors from anyone.

"You used to have some money, Grober,"

he haltingly began. "Norris and this drought have drained me dry. The city banks won't give me any more credit." He swallowed hard. "I've got to have money or I can't hold my ranch together."

Grober looked at the ground.

"I never hated to say anything so much in my life," he muttered hoarsely, "but I—I just haven't got it, Carter. I had a lot of money out, and I lost it all when the ranchers around here started going down." He wiped his chin with his hand. "Mebbe you're just worried. You've weathered bad times before. You can last this out, too."

For a long while Old Blalock didn't move. Then he held out his hand to Grober and when he spoke, his voice held no resentment.

"No, this time I can't make it," he confessed. "But don't look so confounded crestfallen. I understand. You're one of the few real friends I've got left, Grober, and that's enough for me."

Blalock slid the reins over his horse's head, mounted stiffly. He had counted on getting money from Grober. He was hard hit, but he covered up well. Grober looked up at him unhappily.

"Carter, I haven't taken a drink in twenty years," he blurted. "But I feel so terrible about this I'm gonna break that rule. There are times for everything, and the only thing I can think of for this is more liquor than a man can carry."

Blalock grinned wryly and rode off, calling Grober a "sentimental old fool."

After Grober was gone, Kip Lorrimer stood on the bank, staring down at the place where the two men had talked. In the soft white sand where Grober's bay had waited, was clearly visible the distinctive right front shoe print the ranger had followed up on the rim.

What game was Grober playing? How did he fit into the picture? Had he actually been waiting on the rim for a shot at young Blalock or was Kip Lorrimer reading his signs wrong?

The ranger was a puzzled man as he rode back into town. Soon after dark that evening, he headed for the saloon. He wondered whether the mayor was actually serious about getting drunk. He suddenly wondered a lot of things about Grober.

A blare of noise greeted Kip as he pushed through the batwings. The crowd of laughing, talking punchers were in a holiday mood. To Lorrimer's surprise, Rocky Norris met him with the friendliest of greetings, insisted on buying him a drink. Donna Williams joined them.

"Still surprises me to see a man wearing low quarter shoes, a store suit and no gun on his hip," she laughed.

Kip muttered that he guessed he did look out-of-place, feeling the same uneasiness he had the night before under her scrutiny.

"Oh, you'll probably be wearing guns like the rest of them soon," she returned.

Kip turned the conversation away from himself, asking what the celebration was about. Donna pointed to Grober at a table.

"Funny thing," she said. "Grober came in about sundown, solemn as a judge, and began slugging down whiskey. First time he's ever taken a drink in here. These punchers were all so delighted they said they'd make a real party of the event."

NORRIS went over and steered Grober to the bar. Men crowded close around them, grinning as though something humorous were going to happen. Rocky began to compliment his companion on being such a fine mayor, telling him how the whole town was behind him.

". . 'preciate it," mumbled Grober. "I wash 'fraid you wouldn't like me 'pointing a sheriff on that rustlin' business."

"I'm for it a hundred percent," boomed Norris. "Fine idea." They clicked glasses and drank. "But you want to pick a fair man, one that won't take sides," he warned.

Grober's boots slipped off the footrail as he set his glass down. Norris' arm kept him from falling.

"Worries me," the mayor lamented. "Shore worries me. Can't find a local man. No money to bring in an outside lawman."

Kip watched Norris glance at the men around him and winked.

"No problem at all," the rancher said. "We don't need a high-priced, wonder lawman. We got a perfect man here. No strings on him and the whole town would back him up."

"Who's that?" asked Grober in astonishment.

"Why Lorrimer, of course," Norris roared. "He's an outsider, good background, honest. He'd be better than any

cowhand we brought in here."

Kip stiffened. He had known a practical joke was in the making, but he hadn't expected this. He watched the punchers fight to keep their faces straight of the ridiculous idea of making a dude sheriff of Carson. Before he could recover his wits, Grober heaved away from the bar, moved unsteadily down the lane of men which opened to survey Norris' suggested candidate.

Only a very drunken man would have considered the proposal for a moment. But under the smooth flow of Norris' talk and the urgings of his ring of men, the unsteady mayor seemed to see every needed quality of a good sheriff in Lorrimer.

"Le's appoint 'im right now," he said. "Gotta have a sheriff in Carson."

Any protest Lorrimer entertained was swiftly silenced by Norris' explanation of what a wonderful job it was. The job paid sixty-five dollars a month and his appointment would run until the next election, six months away.

"You can't be removed for six months unless you do something crooked," Norris said with considerable satisfaction.

The opportunity to get the last laugh was too wonderful for Kip to refuse. The ranger decided to play along with the joke. Their faces would be red when they found out the truth. And in the role of an ineffectual sheriff, a laughing-stock, he would have an even better opportunity to get to the bottom of the Carson trouble without arousing suspicion.

"I'll take it," Lorrimer said, trying to look pleased and flattered. With many assists from Norris, Kip was immediately given the oath of office by Grober. The mayor dug a badge out of his pocket with much fumbling, pinned it on Kip's coat.

Niles Trent had sardonically watched the proceedings. Now he made his contribution. "Our sheriff oughta have a gun, men!" he declared. "Let's chip in and give him a shootin' iron."

He held out his Stetson and silver dollars began to rain into it. He handed the proceeds to Donna. There were always several unclaimed guns and holsters behind the bar.

"You could buy three guns with this," she said, looking at the money.

"Give him two then," Trent guffawed. "I seen plenty of sheriffs with two guns that I didn't think any more of than this feller."

Kip submitted innocently while the guns were buckled on him. But this sight was too much for the punchers. They collapsed from laughter. Even Kip smiled inwardly, knowing what a ridiculous figure he cut.

The ranger heard Norris tell Trent between gasps, "Wait until Blalock hears about this. He wanted a sheriff, and by the saints, we've given him one."

This crude joke was aimed at the Blalocks. It was an effective way of showing them how much justice they could hope to get in Carson.

"They all seem mighty pleased to have me as sheriff," Kip said with a straight face to Donna.

"Yes, don't they?" she said, her lips quirking.

"I guess a lot of people will be pretty surprised," he commented.

Her black eyes suddenly met his. Her mouth was smiling but her eyes weren't. "I think they will be," she said evenly.

And as he walked out of the saloon, the two heavy guns slapping at his thighs, Kip felt certain one person in Carson had guessed part of the truth about him. He fooled the men easily, but he didn't fool Donna. Yet strangely, though her ties with Norris were common talk, she made no move to give Lorrimer away.

He sat down on the dark porch when he got home, tried to fit a few more pieces into the puzzle. As he sat there, he heard footsteps in the street, looked up to see a short, fat figure walk briskly past. Lorrimer gave a low, soundless whistle.

The man was Hank Grober. And no drunken man ever walked that straight or that fast.

IV

STEPPING into the hall the next morning wearing the badge and the two guns, Kip Lorrimer felt as conspicuous as the first robin in spring.

It was his luck that Susan came out of her room at the same time. She looked at him blankly, opening and closing her eyes as though she thought the strange vision would go away.

"What on earth are you playing?" she

said at last. "That get-up . . .?" Her gaze was a terrible and withering thing

"Uh," gulped Kip nervously, "merely the badge of my office and the guns the boys gave me. I've been made sheriff."

Two red stains of color came to her cheeks, and she didn't trust herself to speak for a bit.

"This happened at the saloon, did it?" He nodded and started quickly into an explanation of how pleased everyone was. She cut him short. "You silly greenhorn! How could you be so dumb as to think you could be a lawman here. Those men were just making a jackass out of you. Go take those guns off before you kill yourself!"

Kip was beginning to enjoy himself. He tried to look hurt.

"I warned you about staying away from that saloon if you wanted to stay here," she continued angrily. "Now you can pack up and find another place to stay."

He watched Susan toss her blonde head indignantly. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, he thought.

"If it's all right," he said meekly, "I'll wait 'till later to move. I'd better see whether Grober's got any jobs for me to do this morning." He paused, then added as an afterthought, "Do you think I can get shells for these guns at the store? I want to load them up so I'll be ready for any trouble."

She stamped her foot in disgust.

"Don't make yourself ridiculous by wearing those guns outside," Susan erupted. "At least pretend you knew it was all a joke. Why, the idea!" She turned and flounced back into her room.

Kip chuckled, then his face grew serious, and he walked to the front door. He actually did want to see Grober, merely to find out how the mayor would act this morning. He still couldn't figure out Grober.

As he walked toward the store, he noticed more men than usual loitering along the street. He knew they were waiting to see what kind of a fool the greenhorn would make of himself. His steps slowed when he neared the store. He heard Carter Blalock inside raging at the mayor. It hadn't taken long for word to get to the old rancher.

Kip stepped quietly inside the door and listened. Grober leaned against the counter, his head down, looking dreadfully ashamed. The tall, gaunt rancher stood before him, trembling with anger.

"But I didn't know what I was doing," Grober protested. "I'm not a drinking man, and—well—they made a fool out of me."

"Don't you realize that dude's in there for six months and we can't do a thing about it," snapped Blalock. "You know Norris won't let him resign. This really means the finish. He can steal me blind, do anything he wants to, and use that tenderfoot to keep him out of trouble."

Kip coughed and scraped his feet on the floor. With no hint that he had overheard them, he walked over to them, friendly as a puppy.

"Mornin', mayor. Mornin', Mr. Blalock," he said heartily.

Carter Blalock jammed his hat on his head, and with a wild rush of profanity, went stamping out of the store. Kip heard the old man's horse rear and leap forward under the savage rake of his spurs.

Men began to drift into the store, unable to restrain their curiosity any longer. Grober looked from them to Lorrimer, and his downtrodden, unhappy air evaporated. He made no move to ask Kip to resign.

"What can I do for you, sheriff?" he asked.

Kip hitched up his gun belts. "Gimme some ammunition. Fellows tell me I oughta keep my guns loaded."

Grober bent over the counter and looked at the guns. "Hmmm, thirty-two's," he said, winking broadly at the watching cowboys. He handed Kip two boxes of shells.

The ranger took them without protest. Every man in the room, including Grober, knew the guns were forty-fives. The storekeeper was proving he could go along with a joke. By showing up Kip's ignorance, he would divert their joshing about himself.

Kip heard the roar of laughter as he walked out on the street. A two-gun sheriff who didn't even know the proper shells for his guns was enough to panic any group of punchers.

He was still holding the two boxes of shells when he blundered into Rocky Norris and Susan sitting in the front room of the Nelson home. Norris was obviously paying his idea of court to the girl. Kip firmly planted himself on a chair between the two.

Before Norris could grow irritated at the intrusion, Doc Nelson came in looking at his watch. "What happened to Niles Trent?" he asked. "I was supposed to go somewhere with him at ten, and it's past that now."

Norris took out a cigar and thoughtfully lit it. "Wouldn't look for him, if I were you," he said. "I sent him out to talk to young Blalock. Thought maybe he could buy a little land for me."

The rancher's face was expressionless, but his eyes watched them. He knew better than anybody else that for Trent to set foot on Blalock property meant gunplay, especially if he confronted Cary with an insulting offer to buy the ranch.

"You know Cary won't stand for that," Susan said accusingly.

"Why not?" said Norris. "Trent don't want trouble." He brushed a fleck of dust from his shirt. "Of course, if Cary meets a friendly business offer by jerking his gun—well, a man can't get in trouble for defending himself, can he?"

Susan jumped to her feet, her fists clenched. She had grown up with Cary and he was almost a brother to her.

"Somebody's got to stop Trent," she said, her lips trembling as she looked at her father. "This is just a cheap trick to kill him!"

"Honey, no man in town would face up to Trent," the doctor told her, his face pale.

Norris rose and picked his hat up from the table. "We've got a sheriff, haven't we," he said sarcastically. "If you're so worried, why not send him after Trent."

Seeing the girl's distress, Kip forgot for the moment the role he was playing. He only wanted to help her.

"Of course, I'll go!" he offered.

"Oh, you . . . !" she began. The intervention of the tenderfoot clown at this point was too much for her. Tears welled up in her eyes and she ran sobbing from the room.

SHE accidentally brushed Kip's arm as she passed, knocking the cartridge boxes to the floor. Several shells rolled out and he did not delay to pick them up. He hurried to his room, substituted his own forty-five for the gun in the left holster, filled the belt with shells.

He started to take off the other gun, then hesitated. He'd wear them both. Trent thought he was right-handed, and if it came to gunplay, he would gain that much more advantage by having the wrong hand watched. It would take the help of every trick he could manage to beat the gunhawk's skill.

Doc Nelson was waiting for him, a gun hanging awkwardly at his hip. Susan was pleading with him. Rocky Norris had gone.

"If the tenderfoot has the nerve to go, certainly I have," Nelson said gruffly. "I've closed my eyes to a lot of things, but I couldn't live with myself if I sat by and saw this happen." He pulled away from her. "Let's saddle the horses," he told Kip.

Lorrimer knew he couldn't stand another long session in the saddle. His back was sore from the previous ride. "Couldn't we go in the buggy?" he asked, feeling foolish at making the request.

A strange, startled look came into both Susan's and the Doc's faces. They assumed he couldn't even ride. Susan dropped her hands helplessly. She disappeared, returning with Nelson's instrument bag when they were ready to go.

Long after they were gone, Susan sat woodenly in the front room. She stared at the floor, seeing in her mind the two men who were riding out to face a hired killer. Suddenly she realized there were chair where Lorrimer had sat. She picked several cartridges scattered around the one up and looked at it.

Then with dry, aching sobs she began to cry. "A helpless old man and a fool who doesn't even know the right shells for his gun," she cried. "They'll never come back alive."

Doc Nelson knew the Carson country like the back of his hand. He had travelled it on sick calls so many times that he knew every possible shortcut.

Dust spattered out behind the flying buggy wheels in twin wedges. There was no wind and the heat ran over the flat prairie in glassy pools. Kip noted the few cattle he saw were in better shape than most around Carson. Blalock must have more water and better range than the other ranchers, which would account for Norris' ruthless efforts to get hold of the place.

Kip was beginning to grow restless, when they finally topped a low rise and a half

mile away he saw the house and outbuildings. He saw, too, the rider leisurely loping along. Niles Trent had timed his arrival so he would catch Cary at lunch with his father.

"All right, Doc," Kip said grimly, and a gun was suddenly in his hand. "This is where you get out." He didn't mean to see the old man stop a bullet, and that was the only thing he could do in a fight.

Nelson mouth dropped and he started to protest. But Kip grabbed the reins, and as the buggy stopped, he half pushed the doctor out. He was moving again, his gun in the holster, before an appropriate epithet came to the Doc's tongue.

Trent, up ahead, swung from his horse about a hundred yards from the ranch house. He shouted for Cary to come out, his eyes glued to the front door, his hand near his gun. His very manner told that he had no thought of talking business with the boy.

The buggy was almost upon Trent before he heard it. Then he spun wide-legged, relaxing only when he saw the tenderfoot climb out. His thin mouth twisted irritably, but before he could speak, the front door slammed and young Blalock was on the porch.

"Start ridin', Trent!" the boy yelled. "Your kind ain't welcome here and you know it!"

Trent laughed, an ugly laugh calculated to goad Cary into a temper. "Why don't you make me go, daddy's boy?" he sneered.

Then Lorrimer dealt himself in. "You heard him, Trent," he snapped, "so get goin'. I'm taking you back to Carson with me. You've caused enough trouble around here for one man!"

A slap in the face wouldn't have turned Trent more quickly. His yellow eyes flamed and his lips flattened back like a mustang's. He looked at the man he thought was a tinhorn, and then, too scornful to use his gun, he lunged forward. There was time for him to flatten the dude sheriff and still handle Cary.

BUT Kip wasn't taken off guard. He slid inside the roundhouse blow, leaned his weight into a left and then a right. The jarring impact of his fists gave the ranger a swift, savage pleasure. And for all his rawhide toughness, Trent staggered and went down, blood starting from his torn mouth.

Insane rage lashed the gunman to his feet. In his hate, he forgot everything except the man who hit him. For the yellow-eyed mad dog, the world held only one man, Kip Lorrimer.

"I'm gonna kill you, Lorrimer," he rasped. "I'm gonna kill you the hard way —through the belly—and watch you die."

"You tried that once before," the ranger said. "Remember? Only you were wearing a mask then."

The gunhawk's eyes clouded as he sought the dude's meaning. Then he hunched forward, peering. His breath began to come faster and abruptly he watched Kip's right hand, the one he thought was his gun hand.

"Don't try it," Kip warned.

But as he spoke, Trent went for his gun, his shoulders rolling back in that peculiar way the ranger remembered, his extended fingers clawing downward. And for the first—and last—time in his life the gunhawk was too slow.

Trent died on his feet, his glazed eyes still watching the ranger's frozen right hand, watching it while three times from hip level Kip Lorrimer's left gun spewed death.

Trent staggered and fell. His pistol was clear of the holster but it didn't discharge until he hit the ground.

The bullet furrowed Kip's coat on the right shoulder. The ranger winced, felt the swift flow of blood. But a glance showed him it was only a minor scratch.

Then the astounded Cary Blalock, who had watched the swift violence with unbelieving eyes from the porch, was running out to Kip.

"You outdrew him!" the boy gasped. "You outdrew Trent! I saw it but . . ."

". . . you can't believe it," Kip finished for him. He knew he had to trust the boy with his secret.

Lorrimer glanced over his shoulder, saw that the painfully running doctor had seen nothing because the buggy blocked his none-too-good vision. Likewise, Carter Blalock, only now coming from the ranchhouse to investigate the shots, had not witnessed the gunplay.

Kip reached in his pocket, snapped open a thin wallet, held it out to the youth. The silver ranger badge pinned on the black

leather told his story. Respect came into the befuddled boy's face.

"I'm here to help you and your dad," Kip said hurriedly, "but people mustn't know who I am yet. When Nelson and your dad get here, we'll tell them you killed Trent, shot him in self-defense. And remember, I only got in the way!"

Cary gulped, but before he could speak, Old Blalock and the Doc were gawking at the corpse and sputtering questions. Nelson was so excited that for a minute he said nothing about Kip's forcing him from the buggy.

"Cary stopped him," Kip explained admiringly. "Saved my life, he did!"

Cary stirred uncomfortably under the bug-eyed stares of the older men. It was a miracle, but it was a miracle they had to believe because there the evidence was before them.

"Lordy, lordy," murmured Old Blalock, seeming to see his son for the first time.

Then the Doc fixed Kip with an angry glare as he remembered.

"Now Doc," Kip said, anticipating him, "I didn't want you to get shot. That's why I did it. You don't know anything about guns."

"Hmph!" snorted Nelson. "And what part did you play in this fight, Mister Expert?"

Kip dug his foot in the ground, averting his eyes. "I got shot," he confessed shyly. "Guess I kinda got in the way." He indicated his shoulder.

Immediately, the Doc was all kindness. He bandaged the scratch, muttering something under his breath about the Lord taking care of fools and drunks. But from that time on there was a new friendliness in his manner. The greenhorn had courage and meant well, even if he didn't have good sense.

With Trent's body thrown on the floor of the buggy, Nelson and the ranger were almost back to town, when the Doc said, "Norris is a funny hombre. He's gonna be plenty mad about this. It's gonna mean trouble for the Blalocks, and probably trouble for us."

V

WHEN they drove up in front of the house, Susan came running out. Then she saw Trent's body. "Why, it's Trent!" she exclaimed. "But who did it?" Before they could reply, she was staring at Kip's blood-stained shoulder, her mouth dropping open as she tried to swallow the obvious conclusion that Kip had fought and killed the gunman.

"No, honey, Lorrimer didn't do it," her father laughed. "It was Cary." Then as though ashamed of belittling Kip, he hastened to add, "But the sheriff was in there tryin'. He caught a bullet."

"Oh!" she said, with a kind of relief. But later when Nelson drove over to the saloon alone to turn Trent's remains over to Norris, she off-handedly told Kip it wouldn't be necessary for him to move after all.

Kip was waiting for Nelson when he returned. The Doc was pale and more nervous than usual.

"Norris was like a wild man," he said. "He's gatherin' his men and I believe he's plannin' to smash Blalock." He passed his hand across his face. "But I got my own worries now. He told me either he married Susan by Saturday or I'd be found full of lead. I've stalled him a year and now it's the showdown.

Lorrimer walked to the window, looked down the dusty mainstreet. He saw three Norris men riding toward the saloon. Another was walking along the street, heading the same way.

"We'll think of something," Kip assured the doctor. "At least, we've got a little time."

Nelson came over and put his hand on the ranger's shoulder.

"I don't know whether you have or not," he said queerly. "I made the mistake of telling him you were the only one who saw the shooting. He said to tell you to get over there quick. I didn't like the way he said it."

Kip looked at the doctor and his expression didn't change. He felt deadly cool. The self-doubts, the indecision, the mental scars of a sick man which he had brought to Carson were abruptly gone. A quiet calm pushed everything out of his mind but Rocky Norris.

"I think it's time I had a talk with him myself," he said, and walked out of the room. Few of the hard-faced men along the street spoke, but Kip didn't notice.

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He passed them with a slow, purposeful walk.

Only two people were in the saloon, the blank-faced bartender and Donna Williams. She was sitting at a table, her eyes fastened on the door. He saw her grow tense when he entered. He sensed she was waiting for him.

"Well?" he said. Her black eyes, deep and impenetrable, were studying, assessing him.

"Look," she said. "I don't know exactly who you are, but you aren't the man you pretend to be." She reached out and took his left hand, her fingertips tracing the telltale callouses. "You only get those from handling a gun."

He said nothing.

"Men are my business, Lorrimer," she continued. "I've studied them like these punchers study cattle. You wouldn't be a lawman, would you?"

"And what if I am?"

"If you are, I mean to see that you stay alive long enough to put Norris behind bars. Just leave your guns alone when you see Rocky. If he gets rough, don't try to fight, because you'll never get out of that back room if you do. You can't win now, but I'll see that you do tonight, and you'll have all the evidence you need by then!"

Apparently Donna was familiar with the move Norris was planning now against the Blalocks. Kip needed that evidence before he could lay a finger on Rocky. But Donna was Norris' woman. It was foolish to believe she would turn against the rancher. She seemed deadly serious, but it was too much for Kip to blindly swallow.

"Who are you loading, Donna?" he asked with a thin smile. "Why would I expect you to help me instead of Norris?"

"Because you're not the one who is throwing me over to marry Susan Nelson," she said, the words bitter to her mouth. "You're the only person who can fix Norris like I want him fixed!"

Kip abruptly understood why Donna was willing to pull the world down around Norris' head. "It's a deal," he said, and walked toward the back of the saloon.

Norris was waiting in one of the small rear rooms. He sat at a table, surrounded by four of his men. His face was mean-looking when he saw Lorrimer.

"I'm not used to waitin' for people, Lorrimer," he snarled. The four punchers moved behind the ranger. "You were the only one who saw the shootin', I understand. You know it was murder! Get over to Grober's and swear out a warrant for Cary Blalock!"

He heaved out of his chair, grasping the edges of the table with his big hands. He was like an enraged bull.

"I'm calling in my men and you can deputize them. We're bringin' Blalock in! He'll hang for this."

The cold-blooded rancher was turning Trent's death to his own advantage. He meant to bluff the dude sheriff into swearing out a murder warrant and then under the protection of the law he could turn his gunmen loose on the Blalocks. It was a shrewd, brutal trick.

"You've got it wrong," Kip said mildly, still staying in character. "Young Blalock shot in self-defense."

Norris' hand shot across the table and grabbed Kip's shirt front. He twisted the cloth, dragged Lorrimer up close against the wood.

"I say it was murder," he growled ominously. "You'll say the same thing if you want to stay whole. I mean to get Cary Blalock and you're gonna help me do it!"

Anger rose in Lorrimer. "I won't frame the boy," he said heatedly.

NORRIS shoved him with a sudden thrust, throwing him back into the arms of the punchers. Instinctively, Kip struggled, trying to jerk free and bring his fists into play. Men were pummeling him, attempting to pin him down. Hands grasped for his guns, and under the rough handling his rear pants pocket was ripped open. The contents fell to the floor a moment before he was flung into a chair, bound there with a rope.

"Mebbe a little pursuadin' will make you see things different," Norris said with a leer, picking a quirt up off the table. "Too bad. Men that see things my way get money instead of beatings. With some sense, you could do real well as sheriff, and I'm gonna see you get some sense if I have to whip it into you."

One of the men who had subdued Kip reached down and picked up the leather pocketbook that had fallen from the ran-

ger's torn pocket. He pitched it onto the table and it fell open when it hit. The ranger badge pinned inside the pocketbook *lay* plainly revealed.

Norris stared at the badge, sucking his breath in hoarsely.

"Get Grober over here quick," he ordered, waving his hand at a squat man near the door. "The rest of you clear out, and keep your mouths shut till I call you."

Grober came quickly. He burst in the door and there was none of the friendly, talkative storekeeper about him.

"What's this about a ranger," he exploded, and then seeing Lorrimer tied in the chair, he went slate-grey. The messenger in his excitement hadn't told him who the ranger was.

"So the real boss shows his hand," Lorrimer said contemptuously. "The good, old friendly mayor. The fellow who loves everybody and wants to help the Blalocks."

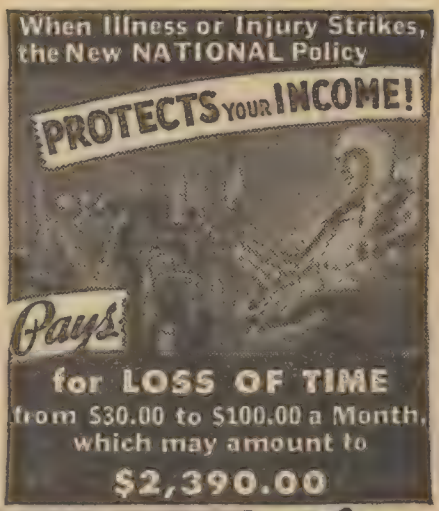
Looking at the fat-mouthed, beady-eyed storekeeper, Kip saw him for what he was. The ranger knew his growing suspicions had been correct. Under his cloak of respectability, Grober for years had been the brains of a widespread rustling gang. His greed grew with success and at last he began to take land as well as cattle, swallowing up the Carson ranchers while all the time they thought he was their friend. He stayed in the background, letting Norris do the dirty work while he did the thinking.

Grober quickly got himself in hand. He stood there staring coldly at the ranger, thinking hard.

"I began to get your skunk smell the day I surprised you up on the rim trying to get a potshot at young Blalock," Kip went on, "and then that drunk act convinced me. I was laughing at you that night when you thought you were being so clever putting a dude in as sheriff."

Kip knew he was in a tight spot. His talk had a purpose. With these two men, bluff was his sharpest weapon.

"I told headquarters how clever you'd been when I mailed my report. Lucky I asked them to send two more men in by this afternoon. That's what I came over to tell Norris. The game's up for you boys."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Grober gave a harsh, ugly laugh.

"Stop bluffing, Lorrimer," he jeered. "You forget I'm the postmaster. I know who writes letters around here, and if I want to, I know what's in them."

Kip knew he had failed. He saw now what had become of the letters Carter Blalock had written to ranger headquarters. Grober had stopped them.

"Ha!" Grober said without humor. "And we thought about using this hombre to get Cary." He wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. "I see now what happened to Trent."

Then he stopped swabbing his forehead, and a cunning look came over his face. He turned to Norris.

"We'll make a clean sweep," he said. "We'll get rid of Cary, the old man and Lorrimer at one time—and it'll all look so legal even the rangers will swallow it when they come lookin'."

NORRIS beamed as he heard the ruthless plan. Grober told him to take a few picked men, tie Lorrimer across a horse and ride up to the Blalock Ranch at dawn. Then under the pretense of arresting Cary, he was to call the Blalocks out, shoot them and Kip in cold blood. Then with the arrest warrant provided by Grober, Norris was to return to town, say the Blalocks had murdered the sheriff and in self-defense the deputies had to kill them.

"Why not kill the ranger now and save a lot of trouble," Norris inquired.

"No!" Grober said. "I want him to be still warm when you hit town with your story. This has got to be foolproof, and this way it will look like he died a brave man and everybody, even the rangers, will swallow it."

He left chuckling at his own cleverness and good fortune. Norris gagged Lorrimer, tied him more tightly hand and foot and threw him into the adjoining room.

"Trent will keep you company," Norris said, pointing to the gunhawk's corpse left untended on a table in the dark room. "We'll bury you both side by side tomorrow."

Kip felt more and more like a trapped animal as the hours passed. At first, he remembered Donna's promise with hope.

Then as the deeper blackness in the room told him night had fallen, he began to despair. Perhaps her talk with him in the saloon was another Norris trick.

The saloon was quiet, so Kip knew it was after midnight when two men came to get him. They carried him into the refuse-littered yard behind the saloon, threw him face down across one of the seven horses standing there. He was tied in a position of sheer torture, his hands and feet knotted together by a rope running beneath the horse's belly.

The two men talked in low tones about the work they must do before morning. Even the kind of men who rode for Norris and Grober felt some qualms about wholesale murder. But they fell silent when they heard footsteps in the saloon and the back door opened. Kip listened for Norris' voice, feeling that his long, last ride was to begin.

Then with a smothered rush of anger, he realized it was Donna Williams, the woman he had been fool enough to place some hope in. "The boys are having a round of drinks," she said to Kip's guards. "If you've got that dumb dude tied up, no reason you shouldn't join them for a minute."

The two hands needed no second invitation. A man with liquor in him didn't care so much how he earned his living. Kip heard Donna laugh mockingly when they assured her even a cyclone couldn't shake Lorrimer free. He heard their footsteps recede into the saloon.

Minutes later Kip roused again, trying to locate an odd sound as of a sack being dragged across the ground. The noise stopped and the door opened again, but this time very softly. Someone walked toward him and he wondered if the men were returning so soon.

"I've coming to keep my promise, Lorrimer," Donna Williams said. She had lured the men back into the saloon and busied them with a bottle in order to win a few minutes alone with Kip.

"We'll have to work fast," she panted, and he felt the thongs drop away from his hands as she slashed through them with a knife. "I pulled Trent's body down the hall," she explained as she worked. "Change clothes with him. Then tie him

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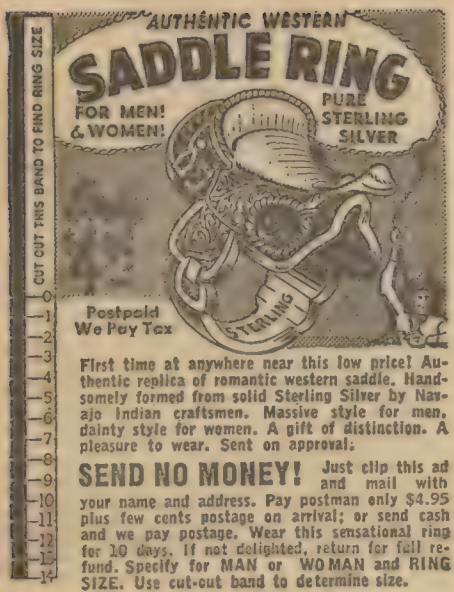

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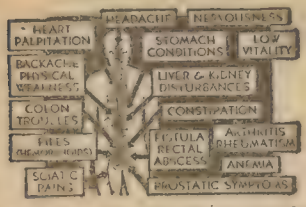

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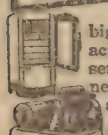

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on the horse. That bottle is keeping them overtime, so when they come out they'll be in a hurry. I don't think they'll notice the difference in the dark."

Then Kip was free, biting his lips at the pain as blood coursed back into his numbed hands and feet. Donna disappeared as quickly and quietly as she had come, hurrying back to make certain the night riders were delayed awhile longer. Clumsy as he was after being bound so long, the sense of urgency which lashed Kip drove him hurriedly to exchange clothes with the dead man.

He smiled mirthlessly when he threw Trent across the horse, noting as he quieted the animal that in store-bought clothes, with a gag concealing his face, the dead gunman made an admirable "sheriff". He jammed his soft felt hat over Trent's ears as the riders had done on him, gave the rope under the horse's belly a final jerk, and was through.

The dude clothes did the trick. With luck, the shift wouldn't be discovered until Norris reached the ranch at dawn. Then would not concern themselves with the "sheriff's" comfort, so there would be no occasion for them to closely inspect him. Since they had gagged Kip so cruelly, they wouldn't expect any conversation out of him.

Lorrimer heard the scuffling of boots in the hall as he pulled on and fastened Trent's chaps. Trent was about his same height and his clothes fit well. Holding the gunhawk's boots in one hand and his empty holster in the other, the ranger ducked around the corner of the building. He crouched there, wondering whether Norris would discover his ruse.

VI

UNARMED, Kip could only wait in the darkness beside the wall and helplessly watch the six figures climb into the saddle and move off in single file. The last man in the line rode off cursing under his breath because Norris delegated him to lead the "sheriff's" horse. No one gave more than a glance at the figure across the pack horse.

The horses' hoofs were muffled and the figures slid into the moonless night. Norris

had impressed his followers with the necessity for slipping out of town without letting a single person know that they were riding against the Blalocks.

Staying in the deeper shadows, Kip started toward Nelson's house, but after taking a few steps in his bare feet, he stopped and thrust his feet into Trent's boots. To his surprise, they fit. He hurried on, buckling the gun belt and empty holster about him as he went.

Late as it was, Kip saw a lamp still burned in the front room. As he entered, Susan's startled cry stopped him. The girl and her father leaped up from their chairs to greet him. Their faces revealed the strain and worry they had undergone about him in the past few hours.

In Trent's clothes, his eyes blazing savagely and his mouth a thin, hard line, Lorrimer was no longer the soft-muscled greenhorn they had known.

"You—you've been hurt," Susan managed at last, seeing the blood-stained shirt. "We've been worried to death. We knew Norris had done something to you, but when dad went to the saloon, Rocky claimed he hadn't seen you since early afternoon."

"I'm all right," Kip said grimly, "no thanks to Norris. But I've no time to talk. I need a gun and horse, and quick!"

In short, terse snatches, he told them what had transpired and that he meant to reach the ranch before Norris.

Kip got a holster and spare gun from his bag. His encounter with Trent had taught him the advantage the two guns gave him in his present position. He had carefully cultivated the fiction during his stay in Carson that he was right-handed, and any opponent he came up against would be watching that hand, not his left.

When Lorrimer reached the stable, he found Nelson and Susan waiting with three saddled horses. "It's too dangerous," he protested. "You two can't go. If Norris has his way, there won't be a witness left alive at the ranch."

"That's right," Nelson said bitterly. "But at least Susan and I will have a chance there. Norris was pretty suspicious of me when I came asking about you. If he loses at the ranch, and he or any of his men get away, they will think I tipped off the Blalocks and their first stop when

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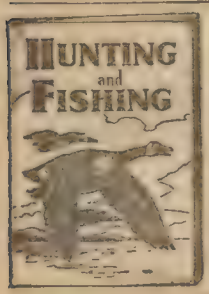

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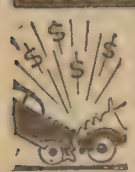

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they hit town will be my house."

Susan placed a hand on Kip's arm. It was the first time she had touched him. He sensed in her action, in her nearness, a plea that they be allowed to go. Her voice betrayed her fear of Norris.

"We'll stay out of the way," she promised. "If Norris wins, dad and I will just keep drifting. Neither one of us would want to be here when he returned."

Kip felt a curious exhilaration as he realized exactly how she felt toward the rancher. Her words and actions before had kept him in doubt. Now he knew she had played an unwilling role of friendliness with Norris merely to keep the rancher from taking out his anger on her father. She'd had no thoughts of marrying Norris.

His arm slid around her shoulder in a tender gesture of assurance. "Let's get moving," he said.

She had on a boy's shirt and pants, an old hat pulled over her hair. He helped her mount. Then, as she watched in astonishment, he swung easily to his own saddle. His skittish, seldom-ridden horse reared a he held it in, waited for the doctor to lead the way.

Kip had overheard enough of Norris' plans to know the rancher was taking the main road to the ranch, so once more the Doc took them along the short cut. They travelled fast, sparing neither themselves nor the horses in the race to reach the Blalock place before dawn.

As they approached the house, Kip held the Nelsons to their promise to stay out of the way. He stationed them in a stand of mesquite several hundred yards from the ranch buildings. Then he rode up to the porch, knowing from the utter quiet that the Blalocks still slept.

At Kip's hail, Cary and Old Blalock came hurrying to the front door. The sky was tinged with grey as the old man and his son stepped out on the porch. Kip saw how easy it would have been for Norris to gun the two men down had he, as sheriff, agreed to call them from their beds. Rapidly, Kip told them the full story, explained that if they worked fast they could turn the tables on Norris.

He learned there were two punchers asleep in the bunkhouse and he sent Cary to rouse them. When the four gathered

around him armed with rifles, Kip gave them his orders.

The ranchhouse yard was boxed in by a corral on the right and a barn on the left. The bunkhouse lay beyond the corral. Lorrimer stationed one of the punchers at the corner of the corral and the other in the barn loft. Then he placed Cary and his father inside the house so they could cover the yard from windows at either end of the porch. Kip, himself, stood just within the door.

Since Norris' ruse hinged on luring the Blalocks outside under the belief that the sheriff wanted Cary, Kip figured the night-riders would come close to the porch. By placing his own men so that they could pour fire into the yard from three angles, Kip hoped to avoid bloodshed, convince Norris that resistance was hopeless. He wanted live prisoners, if possible, though his plan involved considerable personal risk.

It was rapidly beginning to grow light. Then came the muffled sound of riders in the direction of the bunkhouse. Norris was investigating the bunkhouse, making certain no Blalock men were there before coming on to the main house.

Once assured no cowhands were around to cause them trouble, the raiders came toward the house in a rush. Norris bellowed:

"Come out, Blalock, you and the boy, with your hands up! The sheriff's with us. He's deputized us to take you to town. Lorrimer wants Cary for Trent's murder and he's holding you as an accomplice."

Carter Blalock scraped his feet and made a great to-do of hurrying to a window. "What's that?" he asked. "What's going on?"

NORRIS repeated his story. His men remained mounted, reining their horses into line in front of the porch. Norris waited at the door.

"How do I know you won't shoot us down if we come out?" Old Blalock said, repeating Kip's instructions.

"We're playing this fair," Norris assured him. "The law wants you, not us. We're leaving our guns alone if you come out quietly, but if you cause trouble, then we'll burn you out."

The raiders were playing a rattlesnake's

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game, making no hostile move until they lured both men into the open. Not one of them made a move toward his gun. Kip's four companions had heard Norris incriminate himself. Now it was time for the Ranger to intervene. Lorrimer pushed open the door and stepped outside.

"You're a little mixed up, Norris," he said coolly. "You're the one being arrested!"

Shock held the six raiders spellbound.

Norris jerked around, ripped the lead rope from the hand of the man beside him. He pulled the pack horse up towards him, and bending over, ripped the hat and gag from the bound figure. Even in the dim light there was no mistaking the trick Kip had played.

Norris whirled back to face Lorrimer, his shoulders cocked for action. He was startled, but he had no thought of failing in his mission.

"Don't try it, Norris," warned Lorrimer. "You're covered from three sides. The first man that moves will be blown out of the saddle."

The raiders stiffened, and Kip felt his own nerves grow taut. He watched the men trying to judge whether they were actually surrounded or whether it was a bluff. Kip could see Norris' face in the grey light, strained and drawn, as his eyes probed for the men Kip mentioned.

The ranger could almost guess what was going through the cold-blooded rancher's mind. He had come too far to retreat now. His only chance to retrieve the situation was to fight. And with his men crowded on either side of him, Norris himself was protected from any fire except the ranger's. He didn't care what happened to his men, if he could pull himself through safely, and by dropping Lorrimer and making a dash for the house, he might yet finish the Blalocks.

"You can't make it!" Kip warned, reading Norris' thoughts. "Throw down your guns, Rocky. The show's over!"

Rocky's eyes were glued to Kip's right hand which rested on his pistol butt. He smiled, a thin, weasel smile, then relaxed as if he accepted defeat. But Lorrimer watched him like a cat would a mouse.

"All right, Lorrimer, you win," Rocky said. "I know when I'm whipped. I guess you feel real pleased with yourself."

Norris reached slowly for his gun, emphasizing his innocent intentions by using only his thumb and forefinger to grasp the butt. As he drew the dangling pistol from the holster, he had all the earmarks of a beaten man.

Suddenly he said, "Catch!" and tossed the gun at Lorrimer. He threw it straight towards the Ranger's right hand. It was a clever trick to make Kip instinctively reach for the thrown weapon.

Kip's right hand swung away from his gun butt, reached to catch the pistol. This was the move Norris awaited. Rocky's mouth ripped apart in a savage snarl and his hand darted beneath his opened vest. With deadly speed he reached for his hidden gun.

Two shots slammed so closely together they sounded as one.

Kip Lorrimer, his left hand filled with a smoking six-gun, crouched on the porch. He had known Norris' cowardly breed too long to be taken in by the rancher's trick. Before Norris' fingers had dived beneath his vest, Kip had drawn and fired.

Norris jerked upright, then reeled back in the saddle as his horse reared. He was thrown free, falling hard as the horse bolted. By a miracle, the trampling hoofs missed him.

But the roar of gunfire blasted the other outlaws into action. They clawed for their weapons, intent on making a break for it. Kip fired pointblank into them as he leaped backward, and simultaneously the four rifles opened up with shattering violence, sweeping the bunched riders with a hail of lead.

Horses screamed and went down. An outlaw, caught by slugs from two sides, fell heavily. A rider broke free of the bloody welter, went pounding alongside the corral, bent low over his horse's neck. The Blalock rifleman in the corner of the fence cut the man from the saddle.

Then abruptly it was over. Only one of the raiders was unhurt. He had saved himself by diving to the ground after the first hail of rifle fire and screaming for mercy. The other four were not so lucky. Two were dead, another wounded in the stomach and the fourth moaning with a smashed hip where his horse had fallen on him.

Rocky Norris had two holes in his right shoulder. He was badly hurt, but with proper care he would live.

Carter Blalock came stamping out of the

house, his old eyes fierce with battle, his rifle cradled for action. There was no triumph in his face, only the grim dogged look of a peaceful man who'd been driven too far. His two cowhands moved in from the corral and the barn, stunned by the swift violence, bewildered by the part they had played in the victory. Even the usually high-spirited Cary was pale and shaken.

Kip Lorrimer alone appeared unmoved by the bloody interlude. In a quiet voice, he ordered the hurt men laid out on the porch, the clothes cut away from their wounds. The unhurt raider he had tied up.

Doc Nelson and Susan galloped up when the gunfire ceased. From their hiding place, they saw the savage swirl of battle precipitated by Norris' attempt to trick Lorrimer. The Doc hit the ground asking questions, but Lorrimer cut him short, put him to work on the wounded men. Without a word, Susan pitched in to help her father.

When the men were bandaged, Susan stood back on the porch out of the way, apparently seeing no one but Lorrimer. Her puzzled eyes never left him. Except to glance at her when she rode up, he paid her no attention. As soon as he was satisfied that the injured men had been cared for, Kip strode off toward the corral with the two Blalock punchers, arranging for them to ride out and bring in the rest of the hands. Kip knew he would need help when he closed in on Grober.

Cary's spirits rapidly mounted as he realized the extent of their victory. He watched Lorrimer admiringly. This one slim lawman had done in a few days what all the honest ranchers in Carson banded together had been unable to accomplish in years. Cary went over to Susan.

"Did you see that fellow in action?" he asked her. "He beats anything I ever heard of, walked out calm as if he was in church, let Norris make his play and then blew him out of the saddle."

Susan took her eyes away from Lorrimer with difficulty, looked wonderingly at Cary.

"I saw him," she said, "but I still can't believe it. It just isn't possible. Why, only yesterday he didn't even know what kind of shells to buy for his guns."

Cary broke out laughing. There was no point in keeping Kip's secret any longer. "That greenhorn," he said gleefully, "happens to be one of the roughest, toughest rangers in Texas."

"Oh!" she gasped weakly. "Oh, no!" And remembering the way she had treated him because she thought he was a weak-kneed, dissolute dude, she sat down suddenly in a chair.

It was a strangely subdued Susan who greeted Lorrimer after he loaded the prisoners into a wagon, came over to tell her they were ready to move. Kip looked at the girl and then at the grinning Cary. His eyes twinkled.

"Guess you'll be making me move again," he grumbled, "now that you know I'm a deceitful man as well as a barroom rowdy."

VII

THE DOC drove the wagon carrying the wounded outlaws. Lorrimer, Susan and the Blalocks rode alongside. They headed for a place Old Blalock called "First House," which was about half way to town. Four of his punchers were holding a herd there, and it was a convenient gathering point for the hands farther out on the range.

"First place I ever built," Old Blalock laughed, explaining the name when they pulled up at a thick-walled adobe ruin. "Worked nigh on half a year puttin' it up, then found I'd built it in a hollow. Cool wind missed it in the summer and rain flooded it in winter. Only good thing about it was the cellar. Still the best cellar in Texas."

He fell silent, thinking back to the days when he was Cary's age, bringing a young bride out to their first home. Then he roused.

"We'll put the wounded men in there out of the sun," he said. "May be awhile yet before the outfit gets here."

About a mile away four riders held the herd which Blalock had gathered to move to another range where there were better grass and water. One of the riders came ovr and Blalock told him they were going to town to round up Grober and the rest of the rustlers. But he sent the man back with orders to keep the cattle bunched until they were ready to leave. They would spread enough when they had to turn them loose.

Kip began to grow restless as time

slipped by and the hands hadn't arrived. One of the wounded men was beginning to groan. The ranger watched the horizon.

A gulley, washed hip-deep by infrequent rains draining from the long slope behind the house, ran past the door of the house. Dust powdered shrubs marked the course of the gulley for three hundred yards to where it emptied into a patch of scrubby mesquite. Susan sat on one bank, dangling her feet into the depression, watching Lorrimer.

There was a twist of dust to the west. Kip shaded his eyes and watched it. A small black clot came into sight, barely seeming to move at that distance.

"Here they come!" Susan called to the group inside the adobe house.

The riders were driving their horses hard, Kip silently counted the dots, frowning. "How many men you got?" he asked Blalock over his shoulder.

"Seventeen," the rancher replied.

"There's twenty-two men in that bunch," Kip said. "Get your rifles off those saddles and get inside. That's Grober!"

Suddenly grim, the three men and Susan stationed themselves at the narrow windows in the ruined place. Kip led the horses away from the house, glanced regretfully at the men riding herd in the distance. It was too late to summon them now. As he ran back to the house, he could make out Grober on his bay horse.

The riders split into two groups, one cutting behind the house while Grober led the others in from the front. The first shots smashed against the thick walls as Kip stepped through the crumbling door. Grober's voice came harshly over the distance.

"All right, Lorrimer," he shouted. "You men come on out and we'll spare the girl. Make us come in after you and she gets it too!"

Kip's eyes strayed to Susan. He had worried that Grober would get suspicious when Norris failed to return shortly after dawn. Grober was desperate, capable of anything now that he was faced with ruin.

"Don't try to stall," the storekeeper arned. "I know the trick you pulled. After I got through with Donna, she talked plenty. But no trick's gonna get you out of this hole."

Susan's glance slid off of Kip's. She knew what he was thinking. She raised the rifle she held, flogged a shot at Grober.

"There," she declared. "That settles the question. He'd kill me as soon as he would you, so we're all stayin' right here."

Lorrimer looked at her father. The grey-haired doctor's eyes were steady. "Like Susan says, we'll fight."

When Lorrimer turned back to the door, Grober was scrambling off his horse, frightened by Susans shot. The storekeeper wasted no more breath on talk. He dismounted his men, scattering them in a ring around the house. One man took the horses down into the mesquite stand at the end of the gulley.

Lead began to splatter against the adobe in a steady drumfire. Kip knew it was only a matter of time. Cary's shooting was effective as shown by the cautious distance the men on his side of the house kept. But the two old men and Susan, despite their courage and grim determination, weren't any match for a pack of kill-razy rustlers.

"They're concentratin' on Susan's side," Cary called abruptly.

Lying flat on the floor Kip saw through a break in the wall the force gathering to rush the west side. He got up, ducked past the door and went to Susan's support. Cary stood ready to lend a hand when the charge developed.

KIP watched the raiders edge on their bellies through the dry weeds and rocks, taking advantage of every bit of cover. They knew their business, moving with the deadly stealth of snakes. The fire increased from the other quarters as the besiegers sought to distract attention from the gathering attack.

Then without any warning noise, ten raiders came to their feet about a hundred yards from the house at the wave of a thin, hawk-faced man who led them. They came up running, driving for the house at break-neck speed. The sprinting gunhawks shot as they ran, throwing lead at the window to block any return fire.

But both Kip and Susan rested their rifles in chinks caused by the settling of the adobe wall. The ranger got the hawk-faced leader through the throat with his first shot, and at that range even Susan couldn't miss. Cary joined them, began to

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hammer bullets into the runners. Two more sprawled head-first, jerking as they died, a third fell with a shattered shoulder.

The others turned tail, moving away from the house faster than they had advanced. The firing died down for awhile after that. For the first time, Kip had an opportunity to assess the damage they had suffered, try to puzzle out a better defense.

The doctor's left arm was wet with blood. Cary had a crease in his cheek. Old Blalock sat flat on the floor, one shoulder ripped where a ricocheting slug had caught him. Not one of them had mentioned his wounds. Before long, though, the hurts would begin to tell on the two older men.

"We'll be runnin' short of shells soon," Cary said grimly. "Can't waste them."

Grober would figure that out, too. He would settle down now, become more wily. There would be no more headlong rushes until their ammunition as exhausted. Then the raiders would sweep in from all sides and it would be over.

"In this lull," Kip directed, as much to keep them occupied as anything, "let's put the wounded in that cellar Blalock was braggin' about."

The old rancher grinned painfully and got to his feet. He walked over and kicked some debris away, uncovering a heavy piece of a former door. Kip slid the wood slab from over the cellar entrance. He went down the rough stone steps, lighting a match to survey the small square room. He made a torch out of a dry piece of wood, stuck it in the dirt floor. Cary and Kip working together quickly carried the prisoners into the cellar.

"Well, they're safe, anyway," Cary said ironically as they took up their positions at the windows again.

The humorless laughs of the others were cut short by Susan's cry. "Look at those crazy punchers. They'll be slaughtered trying to ride in here."

The four Blalock waddies had deserted their cattle, were riding hell-for-leather toward the ring of besiegers. Hunkered low in their saddles, they were flogging straight at the line of gunhawks burrowed down in front of the house. With the reckless courage of angered cowboys, they were coming to the aid of the Blalocks despite the suicidal odds against them.

Kip watched the racing cow ponies, saw the milling, nervous mass of half-wild cattle in the distance behind them, and suddenly his eyes darted to the cellar. He saw a chance for survival, a chance to beat Grober at the moment the storekeeper scented success.

He could hear the excited calls of the raiders outside as they sighted the charging punchers. This was an opportunity which wouldn't come again.

"Listen!" he cried. "I'm going out." Shocked faces turned toward him. "In this confusion, I can get down that gulley to Grober's horses. I'm gonna stampede those cattle straight over Grober. Just before the herd hits this house, dive in that cellar and you'll be safe."

The astonishment on Cary's face, swiftly turned to admiration. Old Blalock's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed as though he were seeing Grober being ground beneath the pounding hoofs of the maddened steers. But there was only fear on Susan's face.

"No, Kip," she pleaded, running to him. "You'll never make it. They'll kill you."

He dropped his rifle and stood up, seeing only her. He knew the risk he took. He saw her face strained and tired, her lips half-parted and trembling. She was thinking only of him, of his safety. And on his part, Susan was the reason his mind sought so desperately for a way out of their apparently hopeless predicament.

In those bloody terrible minutes spent together in the ruined house, facing an end that seemed inevitable, there was no time for the shams and small deceptions with which men and women clutter their relationships. In the eyes of Kip and Susan as they faced each other, were both the realization and the confession that above all else they loved each other.

Kip took a half step and his arms went round her. Roughly, fiercely, he held her to him, his lips hard against hers. Then he abruptly drew away from her, went to the door.

"I'll be back," he promised, without turning.

There was a rolling burst of gunfire outside. The four waddies were within rifle range, and Grober's men opened up. On the punchers came, riding like Indians, flung low over their horses and driving in from an angle, so that little more than an

arm and a leg were visible as targets.

As Kip watched, the lead horse screamed, turned head over heels as a slug broke its foreleg. The rider went careening off. His companions flashed on past him, their six-shooters beginning to speak.

"Cover them!" commanded Cary, shaking the watchers from their paralysis. "Keep those gunhawks flat on the ground."

As the barrage opened from the house, Lorrimer bent low, pistol in hand. This was the moment, now when all attention was fastened on the charging punchers. He leaped from the house, in two steps reached the gully which ran past the door.

Crouching low, he ran down the uneven twisting gully, knowing the gunfire drowned his footsteps. He turned a bend, tripped over the legs of a man lying braced against the bank, firing at the Blalock riders. Kip twisted in the air as he fell. His gun barked before his shoulders hit the ground.

His lead took the surprised raider in the mouth. The man leaped half erect, his brain-spattered hat flying into the air, then he crumpled back over his rifle. Kip was immediately on his feet, running again.

The firing chopped off, leaving a ringing silence. Kip stopped in his tracks, cautiously peered out of the ravine. He had gotten past the ring of men surrounding the house.

A HORSE was dying almost at the door of the house. Another ran riderless a hundred yards away. The third lay with its sprawled rider between Grober's men and the makeshift adobe fort. Kip guessed that one, maybe two of the cowpunchers had joined the Blalocks within the walls.

Kip ducked down again and began the most dangerous part of his stalk. A stone's throw ahead was the guard left with the mounts belonging to those raiders ranged on the south side of the house.

The Ranger covered the last twenty-five yards on his belly, inching through the dry weeds in the gully. He saw the guard, a thin-faced Mexican, sitting against a mesquite, his eyes riveted on the ruined house. Kip rushed.

The Mexican's head jerked around. He tried to wheel, bring his cradled rifle into play. But Lorrimer was on him, clubbing with his forty-five. He smashed the Mexican full in the face twice, then caught him beside the ear wtih his bootheel. The man grunted and slid over on his face.

He heard a burst of firing from the house. His friends were holding Grober's attention. Quickly he cut the horses loose, mounted Grober's bay. He raised his hat to smack it on the flanks of the nearest pony, send the nervous animals galloping out of the raider's reach.

But he hesitated. Out where the first of the four charging punchers had fallen, Kip saw a movement. The man who had been thrown wasn't dead. The ranger watched the man wriggle along behind a foot-high ridge of dirt.

Unable either to join the fight or get away, the cowboy had taken refuge behind a hillock which concealed him from Grober. Kip could use that waddie. Abruptly he changed his plans. He caught the bridle of hte nearest horse, then smacking his hat down he sent the bunched ponies galloping toward the hidden puncher.

Kip spurred alongside of them, keeping the horses between him and the line of gunhawks. He drew the rearing bay up beside the startled cowboy, fighting to hold the frightened mount he led.

"Let's get out of here," he shouted. The waddie needed no urging, though he was bewildered by Kip's sudden appearance. Lead was beginning to sing past them as the man vaulted into the saddle, wheeled to follow the ranger.

Kip led the bay out, circling wide so he would come in behind the mass of cattle. Two riders charging in from the front would send the herd thundering off in the wrong direction. The distant rattle of gunfire already had them milling and bawling.

When they completed their circle and came in behind the herd, Kip reined up. The Blalock puncher stopped beside him. He was a squat, sandy-haired man, steer-tough, with reckless blue eyes.

"What the hell good we gonna do back here," he said, disgruntled. "I mean to help the Blalocks and we can't do it a mile from the shootin'. I thought you rangers was tough."

"Keep your shirt on," Kip grinned. "I didn't crawl out of that house to watch the fight. We're gonna stampede these critters and I want 'em to go straight at that house."

Sudden pleasure showed in he waddie's face as he thought what those maddened cattle would do to the raiders. Then the pleasure was gone, and the man's jaw set stubbornly.

"I ain't doin' it," he said. "It'd get Grober, but it'd get Old Blalock and the others too!"

Kip told him then about the cellar, explained that even if the thick adobe walls should give way, that the Blalocks would be safe in that deep underground room. The puncher's enthusiasm returned immediately. The foretaste of vengeance was good to him.

The two men came up on the flank of the herd, yelling like demons, their six-guns smashing as fast as they could trigger shots. The red-brown mass of cattle erupted as though it were one, vast, many-horned, many-legged beast. In a turbulent, boiling wash, the cattle swerved away from the men, heaved out across the plain in a rolling tidal wave of maddened animal flesh.

The bawling, trampling animals straightened behind their leaders, bolted into top speed under the goading of their terrible, unreasoning herd fear. The earth shook under the pound of hammering hoofs.

And the two men who had started this most dreaded of all range catastrophies split apart in the dust-fogged wake of the stampede, flogged madly up opposite sides of the running cattle, fighting to catch up with the leaders. But for once under such circumstances, the wild-riding punchers who risked their necks at the fore of a stampede were not trying to turn the herd. Kip and his companion meant to make sure the herd didn't turn.

Through dust-spattered eyes, Kip saw five riders sweep away from the house. They were sent by Grober to run Lorrimer to earth, but when they saw the rolling wall of dust, heard the dread thunder of the crazed animals, they halted, went hurrying back to their boss.

Kip could imagine the wild turmoil as Grober tried to mount enough men swiftly to send out to turn the herd. But he knew Grober was already too late. Though he couldn't hear the shots, he was certain Cary and his companions were doing everything possible to pin down the raiders.

At last, eight horsemen came out hesitantly. But Grober's men were gunfighters not cowmen. This was different from rustling a small herd of fat cattle. Before they decided what to do, the mass was on them, and as they separated, going in groups of four on each side of the stampede, Kip lashed shots at them.

He saw one man fall. Then he was in among the riders. As he missed a collision with a yelling gunhawk by inches, he shot twice. He swept on, firing at the figures as they emerged from the dust fog behind him in a half-hearted attempt to come abreast of the herd.

Kip cut wide now, dropping back as the glassy-eyed, bawling lead steers headed blindly into the hollow which held the house. He saw the scrubby mesquite where he had stolen the horses shiver and go down under the drivering impact of the first cattle. There was a pile-up of animals, but the resistless horde smashed on, rolled over and around the fallen beasts.

Grober's men, left afoot after mounting the party sent to head the herd past the house, were running in every direction. In their greater fear of the stampede, they forgot the barking rifles behind the adobe walls. Throwing away their guns, their faces white with fear, they ran with the weaving awkwardness of booted men, trying to get out beyond the edges of the madness that swept toward them.

SPURTS of gunsmoke from the ruined house told no mercy was being shown those raiders who tried to find refuge there. In the ranch country there is no mercy for mad dogs, and Grober's killers were reaping their bitter harvest.

The ranger abruptly saw the fat, short-legged storekeeper. He was running with a speed only the insane lash of fright could give him. One of Grober's mounted men darted out of the dust, spurred toward his boss with the obvious intention of saving him.

Grober saw the rider approaching. He stopped his wild race, and turning, his face a mass of quaking blubber, he waited for the man. Then as the horse slid to a stop, Grober raised the pistol he clutched in his hand, shot the man from the saddle.

The ranger's mouth twisted as he saw the unbelievable brutality with which the rustler chief met the gunhawk's attempt

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to save him. One man on a horse was certain to escape, but with two it would be doubtful. Grober meant to take no chances with his precious skin. He clawed into the saddle, digging his spurs deep in the pony's flanks.

The horse leaped forward, started to gain speed just as the ranger came abreast of it. Screaming and shouting incoherently, Grober looked up suddenly to see Lorrimer bearing down on him. Rocking in the saddle, he fumbled for his gun. Kip fired, knowing there was no hope of taking the crazed killer alive. The roar of the stampede smothered his shots.

Grober jerked twice and there were two red stains on his shirt. He dropped his gun, grasping blindly for his saddle horn. But there was no strength in his hands. His horse cleared a bush and the jolt as it hit the ground sent the storekeeper tumbling from its back.

Kip had no time to stop. The cattle were almost on top of him now. He spurred his horse the twenty-five yards needed to take him out of the path of the stampede, looking back over his shoulder as the rush of animals closed over Grober.

The ranger drew up. His horse was ready to drop, its legs shivering and its breath coming in great, wheezing gasps. While he pursued Grober, the herd had hit and passed the ruined house. One whole side of the adobe place had been forced inward. Trampled steers, the first to hit the wall, lay in a bloody heap before the ruins.

The rumble of the herd receded as it swept on across the plain. Only exhaustion would stop the cattle now. Kip urged his horse toward the ruins. When there was no movement within the crumpled walls, he felt a start of fear.

He leaped from the saddle, ran into the shattered structure. He searched for a moment in the debris before he orientated himself. Then he remembered where the cellar entrance lay. No wonder, his companions hadn't came out. The collapsed wall had fallen across the entrance.

Kip cleared away the adobe chunks over the cellar. Then he caught the heavy piece of planking, heaved it from the opening.

Cary's strained face looked up at him from the blackness. It hadn't been easy on the group crouched in that blackness, hearing the stampede's shattering passage, unable to know what was happening.

"It's over!" Kip said, his eyes searching the darkness behind the boy. "Grober's finished!"

Then Cary climbed out, exclaiming at the scene of destruction which greeted him. A barrage of questions came up from the darkness at Kip, but he didn't hear them. The ranger was reaching down to lift Susan, the strained look going from his eyes when he saw she was unhurt. She came against him then, trembling as she realized it was all over and he was safe.

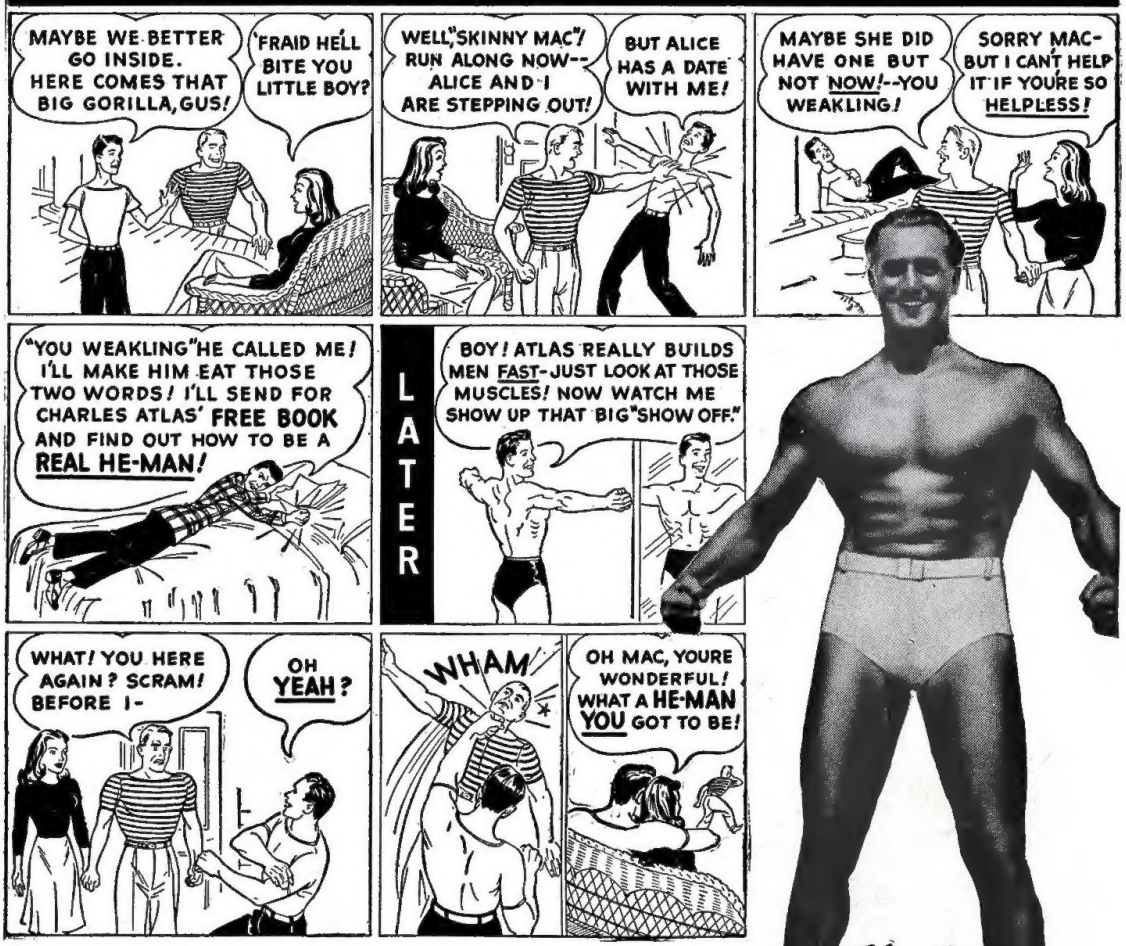
The doctor, Old Blalock, and the two punchers who had reached the house scrambled into the sunlight. The squat, blue-eyed cowboy who had helped Kip start the stampede came in limping. He had been wounded in the thigh keeping Grober's men away from the herd. The puncher excitedly told about the stampede and Lorrimer's part in it.

Doc Nelson looked from the puncher to where Lorrimer held Susan encircled in his arms.

"You know, folks," he said, chuckling, "if he can manage a stampede to suit himself, I guess mebbe he'll be able to handle Susan."

A Fiction House Magazine

HOW JUST TWO WORDS TURNED MAC INTO A HE-MAN!


MAYBE WE BETTER GO INSIDE. HERE COMES THAT BIG GORILLA, GUS!
'FRAID HE'LL BITE YOU LITTLE BOY?
WELL, "SKINNY MAC"! RUN ALONG NOW--ALICE AND I ARE STEPPING OUT!
BUT ALICE HAS A DATE WITH ME!
MAYBE SHE DID HAVE ONE BUT NOT NOW!--YOU WEAKLING!
SORRY MAC-BUT I CAN'T HELP IT IF YOURE SO HELPLESS!
"YOU WEAKLING" HE CALLED ME! I'LL MAKE HIM EAT THOSE TWO WORDS! I'LL SEND FOR CHARLES ATLAS' FREE BOOK AND FIND OUT HOW TO BE A REAL HE-MAN!
LATER
BOY! ATLAS REALLY BUILDS MEN FAST-JUST LOOK AT THOSE MUSCLES! NOW WATCH ME SHOW UP THAT BIG "SHOW OFF."
WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? SCRAM! BEFORE I-
OH YEAH?
WHAM
OH MAC, YOURE WONDERFUL! WHAT A HE-MAN YOU GOT TO BE!

Charles Atlas

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